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**An auto/biographical, cooperative study of our  
relationships to knowing**

**by**

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**Canterbury Christ Church University**

**Thesis submitted**

**For the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy**

**2016**



## ABSTRACT

In this thesis, I explore the relationship between knowing and self-construction among education professionals. The work addresses questions about our relationship with different ways of knowing; and within what I term a psychosocial framework, how the road to selfhood may lie in integrating different ways of knowing, including the rational, emotional, imaginal, embodied, creative, and spiritual. It also questions the tendency to idealize ‘experts’ and disembodied forms of knowledge that are widespread in (higher) education, and even in social and therapeutic work.

Auto/biographically oriented co-operative inquiry was my chosen methodology. The research involved two groups of co-researchers based in two different countries, and included interviews with members of my own family. Exploration of my own reflexive relationship with my object of study shaped it into a quest for meaning and voice.

I composed a multi-layered, multimedia, performative and circular textual understanding via processes of ‘spiralling’ and unfolding that were solidly rooted in a constructivist epistemology. I analysed both individual and group processes in the co-operative inquiry, looking at metaphors and engaging with crises of knowing and self to produce a fresh perspective on transformative research and professional becoming. I also drew on the ‘writing as inquiry’ approach to intertwine myself as knower with my interpretation, thus constantly interrogating the role of prose and poetic writing in pursuing authenticity and selfhood in relation to knowledge. In addition, I explored the evocative use of ‘cultural objects’ as a strategy for integrating subjective and objective sources of knowing. I conclude my dissertation by offering what has provisionally become – for me as author – a satisfying theory.

Taking a view of the self as contingent, developmental and potentially agentic, I claim that by engaging more holistically with feeling, emotion, intuition, imagination and intellect, we may come to experience ourselves as more ‘real’ and integrated knowers.



## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This journey has involved a number of people across different countries, whose support, nourishment and belief have accompanied me throughout. I would like to thank:

My supervisors, Dr Wilma Fraser and Professor Laura Formenti who encouraged me to ‘go with’ the process and lent their ears to the voice that was emerging; Professor Linden West whose generous sharing of his own work and bringing warmth encouraged me to push out my boundaries; the *auto/biographical and narrative* theme group for showing interest in my work; and to Professor Hazel Reid and especially Dr Alan Bainbridge, for his reading and review of my research material and for our intercultural exchange. I would like to thank the Faculty of Education at Canterbury Christ Church University for the financial support that enabled me to live in the beautiful city of Canterbury and completely immerse myself in my project; Dr Carolyn Jackson and Professor Kim Manley at the England Centre for Practice Development, and Dr Angela Voss in her role as head of the MA in Myth, Cosmology and the Sacred for inviting me to hold creative workshops in different settings; the European Society for Research on the Education of Adults, and particularly the *life history and biography research* and *interrogating transformative processes in learning* networks for being such great spaces for learning and questioning what we stand for in conducting education research; Dr Michel Alhadeff-Jones, Professor Jean-Michel Baudouin, Dr Rob Evans, Dr Fergal Finnegan, Professor Alexis Kokkos, Dr Barbara Merrill, among others, for our sustained dialogue over the years. Thanks are also due to Dr Celia Hunt and Professor Nod Miller for their friendship and key conversations about reflexivity and feminism; Jacky Cartlidge, Benedetta Gambacorti-Passerini, Karen Nestor, and Katja Vanini for sharing their theses; Professors Donata Fabbri and Alberto Munari for giving me permission to reproduce an extract from their *Metaphors of Knowledge*; and Clare O’Sullivan for her magical proof-reading abilities and for turning my utterances into elegant English.

Particular thanks must go to the participants, who gave such patience, generosity of time, passion, and openness: in Bicocca, ‘Anna’, ‘Alberto’, ‘Atena’, ‘Beatrice’, ‘Elsa’, ‘Federico’, ‘Giacomo’, ‘Guido’, ‘Mariagrazia’, ‘Nadia’, and ‘Raffaella’; and in CCCU, ‘Ailsa’, ‘Annabel’, ‘Dilbert’, ‘Kate’, ‘Linda’, ‘Norma’, ‘Vanessa’ – you know how much I owe you; as I am greatly indebted to Dr Francesco Cappa for his extensive help with designing and facilitating the research process. My deepest thanks go to my friends and family who have sustained me through the ups and downs of my quest: Chiara Forgillo, Anastasios Gaitanidis, Andrea Galimberti, Mara Pirovano, Katy Russ, Manuela Turati, and Mark Windsor; to Mother, Father, and Grandmother, thank you for continuing the dance at the roots of knowing.



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**Words:** 104,386

(inc. abstract).

... I should like to ask you, as best I can... to be patient towards all that is unresolved in your heart and to try to love *the questions themselves* like locked rooms, like books written in a foreign tongue. Do not now strive to uncover answers: they cannot be given you because you have not been able to live them. And what matters is to live everything. *Live* the questions for now. Perhaps then you will gradually, without noticing it, live your way into the answer, one distant day in the future.

(Rilke, 1929 p. 17)

We cannot interpret the detail generated in our research without having some framework to piece together, however provisionally, the fragments of stories to enable them to find a place in the world.

(Merrill and West, 2009, p. 57)

In writing the other, we can (re)write the self. That is the moral of this story.

(Richardson, 1997, p. 153)

## *Introduction*

*Questa è la danza del serpente  
Che vien giù dal monte  
Per ritrovare la sua coda  
Che ha perso un dì.  
'Ma dimmi un po'  
Sei proprio tu  
Quel pezzettin del mio codin,  
Sì o no?'<sup>1</sup>*

This is the dance of the snake  
Who comes down from the mountain  
To find the tail  
That she lost one day.  
'But tell me now  
Is it true that you  
Are that little piece of my tail,  
Yes or no?'

---

<sup>1</sup> This Italian children's song is sung in a circle, with an extra child invited to join the 'snake' at each repetition.



### **A research project and a quest**

In this thesis, the subject's relationship with knowledge and different ways of knowing is both my main object of enquiry and the theme around which I have attempted to ask questions of professional becoming. I initially set out to conduct a more traditionally detached study, but as my research unfolded it also became a quest for meaning and for my own sense of self as a professional researcher, adult educator, and learner.

Given that my professional search for a 'satisfying theory' (Munari, 1993, p. 61) of self-construction in adult lives was concurrently driven by my own anxieties in relation to knowing and not knowing, it may also be read as a challenging personal journey of transformation through research. My work was underpinned by a constructivist epistemology (Formenti, 1998; Maturana, 1990; Maturana and Varela, 1985) that understands knower and known to be part of the same process, suggesting that both are constructed and 'revealed' in one act of knowing and living.

This explains my decision to situate my enquiry within an auto/biographical framework (Merrill and West, 2009; Miller, 2007; West, 1996; Stanley, 1992). To explore my own perspective, I wrote a personal case study, based on qualitative material that I produced via autobiographical and reflexive writing and by keeping a photographic journal of my research experience. I also interviewed family members to shed light on the genesis of my own relationship with knowing. Other education professionals at two universities in two countries embarked with me on a co-operative inquiry (Heron, 1996) that was co-facilitated by a fellow researcher, Dr Francesco Cappa, who gave his expertise to designing and implementing the empirical phase of my project.<sup>2</sup> Participants told stories of knowing and becoming and developed satisfying theories around these themes.

In the course of my research, I came to rely on particular 'theoretical friends' from a variety of fields: Bernard Charlot in sociology, John Heron and Mary Field Belenky and colleagues in adult education, as well as Donald Winnicott and others in psychoanalysis, all suggested ways of theorizing about what I was experiencing. Christopher Bollas and Laurel Richardson made me sensitive to the aesthetics of my research work and writing, hugely encouraging me to stay with the process. My relationship with these authors developed as I brought a reflexive approach to bear both within and around my research practice: in essence, the research itself produced and brought to light the possibility for me to borrow from the thinking of others to make sense of the material. Theory emerged – from my perspective – as a possibility, via an iterative process that spanned the entire enquiry.

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<sup>2</sup> All those who contributed to the research provided 'informed consent', indicating that they were aware of their rights as participants; furthermore, their anonymity was protected as far as possible, in keeping with the ethical guidelines of the British Educational Research Association (BERA) and of Canterbury Christ Church University.

I adopted 'writing as inquiry' (Richardson, 1997) as both a theoretical framework and a method. Throughout the dissertation, I refer to this approach as 'spiralling', using the image of the spiral to represent (Heron, 1996) the circularity of knowing and living, experiencing and theorizing. As researchers, we bear responsibility for '[writing] ourselves into our texts with intellectual and spiritual integrity' (Richardson, 1997, p. 2). I thus intend this dissertation to be a 'vital text' (ibid. p. 87) that articulates its own unfolding and allows research to emerge as a local, partial and embodied human practice: 'as I begin my search, I know neither the shape nor full content of what might transpire' (Fraser, 2013, p. 2). Writing in uncertainty made it legitimate for me to explore alternative forms that served to reflect and refract the narratives of others: like Richardson, 'I write because I want to find something out. I write in order to learn something that I didn't know before I wrote it' (Richardson, 1997, p. 87). Such a manner of proceeding entails complexity at both the methodological and epistemological levels. In writing this dissertation, I have striven to maintain a dual perspective (Bateson 1979, p. 64) and to meet the challenge of reconstructing the places through which I have come, given that I now write 'after the event'. While I used 'writing as inquiry' as my strategy for developing my line of thinking and arguments, I have had to compromise with the 'need to proffer a finished text for adjudication' (Fraser, 2013, p. 2). Hence, the reader will be signposted throughout this spiralling text and accompanied from the first to the final 'coil' of my quest.

The following were my research questions:

- 1) Question about the contents: *What* theories and strategies do professionals in education, and I myself auto/biographically, develop in order to understand the interplay between knowing and identity in their lives; in other words, how do they relate to knowing and professional self-construction?
  
- 2) Question about the context: *How* does aesthetic reflexivity affect the development of a narrated and/or practiced professional identity in education; and how might a specifically designed space of 'transformative research' encourage subjects to connect their thinking and acting?

In order to address these questions, which concerned me personally as a professional of adult learning, I needed to construct a method that would help me to uncover both my topic *and* myself, as advocated by constructivist epistemology (Maturana, 1990). This entailed acknowledging myself as the 'clumsy' researcher (Sclavi, 2003) and reflexively analyzing the episodes that caused me embarrassment and upset during the research process, so as to bring

my own epistemological frameworks into focus as much as possible, and thereby to connect my narrated and enacted identities.

This approach produced both a method of transformative research<sup>3</sup> and a satisfying theory (Munari, 1993) about knowing and becoming in education.

### **The ‘hiding and performing’ researcher<sup>4</sup>**

Bringing the researcher's own life and orientation into the research framework has become a key methodological focus for biographical approaches to social research informed by feminist critiques of positivistic claims of objectivity in the 1980s<sup>5</sup> (Merrill and West, 2009). Assumptions of emotional detachment and political neutrality, to be attained by means of abstract theories and objective methods, are rejected in favour of a different set of presuppositions that include recognition of the researcher's interests and power. In biographical studies, it is acknowledged that our choice of topic as researchers, and our ways of posing questions, tend to be deeply rooted in the fabric of ourselves and our personal and/or professional biographies (Miller, 2007). This awareness forms what we might call an auto/biographical imagination. The very term 'auto/biography' (with a slash) was coined by feminist sociologist Liz Stanley in 1992, to draw attention to the dynamic interrelationship between the construction of the researcher's autobiography and that of the biographies of others, via a recursive process of meaning-making that reflects the parties' relative social and cultural positioning. Feminist researchers argued in favour of declaring – and critiquing – the factors underpinning their interest in a topic and commitment to researching it (Merrill and West, 2009; Aldridge, 1993; Stanley and Wise, 1983).

My own auto/biographical imagination developed throughout the research process, leading me to embrace a quest for self, integrate opposites in my family stories (between knowing or not knowing), and metaphorically find ‘the lost pieces of my tail’ as evoked in the children's song quoted at the opening of this chapter.

The prequel to this doctoral journey of professional becoming sees me as a ‘performative’ student,<sup>6</sup> and a successful young professional in adult education and training in Italy. Having

---

<sup>3</sup> I translate the French expression ‘*recherche-formation*’ (and the equivalent ‘*ricerca-formazione*’ in Italian) as ‘transformative research’, because compared to the more common ‘training research’, I find it to be more in keeping with how this construct is understood in the biographical approaches (Dominicé 2000, 1990; Josso 1991; Pineau and Pineau, 1983) informing my work. In choosing to speak about transformative research in my thesis, I particularly wish to evoke a conceptualization of research in which the subjects formulate their own research interest(s), and through biographical (and I would add aesthetic) work learn to transform their relationships with themselves as ‘actor[s], author[s] and interpreter[s]’ of their own lives (Josso, 2001, p. 161, my translation).

<sup>4</sup> In this thesis, the terms ‘performing’ and ‘performative’ are placed in inverted commas when I use them to refer to a model of overachievement and uncritical compliance with societal expectations.

<sup>5</sup> This methodological approach is both ethically and politically motivated: the personal is political, in feminist terms.

<sup>6</sup> I hold a Laurea Magistrale in Formazione e Sviluppo delle Risorse Umane – i.e., a Master's degree in the training and development of human resources – from the University of Milano-Bicocca. This gave me a managerial and organizational perspective on formation (becoming), which I found interesting but too mechanistic.

learnt to distance myself from knowing and to protect my complex desires to know (Charlot, 1997) via a strategy of ‘hiding and performing’, I came to a point at which I could no longer bear the *alienation* of my situation. I use the term ‘alienation’ to refer to the condition of being disconnected from one’s feelings, imagination, and sensations, and thus confined to one’s head. In that scenario, I could function effectively, but was not there as a ‘whole person’ (Heron, 1992, p. 19). Psychiatrist R.D. Laing describes the human condition in contemporary Western society as largely alienated:

The madness that we encounter in “patients” is a gross travesty, a mockery, a grotesque caricature of what the natural healing of that estranged integration we call sanity might be. True sanity entails in one way or another the dissolution of the normal ego, that false self completely adjusted to our alienated social reality: the emergence of the “inner” archetypal mediators of divine power, and through this death a rebirth, and the eventual re-establishment of a new kind of ego-functioning, the ego now being the servant of the divine, no longer its betrayer. (Laing, 1967, p. 119)

Laing attributes this state of alienation to a ‘politics of experience’ – also the title of the work cited here – that generates an artificial divide between the ‘inner’ and the ‘outer’ (whatever this may mean), cutting us off from much of the richness of human experience:

[...] but perception, imagination, phantasy, reverie, dreams, memory, are simply different *modalities of experience*, no more “inner” or “outer” than any others. Yet this way of talking does reflect a split in our experience. (Laing, 1967, p. 18, italics in original)

The issue, says Laing, is cultural but also political, given that ‘what we call “normal” is a product of repression [...] it is radically estranged from the structure of being’ (ibid. p. 23). Laing thus acknowledges and points up the broader significance of the subjective experiences of ‘authentic’ self (Winnicott, 1965) and knowing that constitute my material of analysis.

This sense of alienation – of not being there – began to ring a loud bell early on in my professional experience in private companies. Although I was receiving praise and recognition for my work, the cage of estrangement felt suffocating. Even as a student at university, I felt I did not remember the things I had learnt, and had a persistent sense of vagueness and emptiness. How could I reconcile this with what Gregory Bateson referred to as the ‘reasons of the heart’ (1972, p. 129)?

My quest began with a sabbatical in South East Asia, starting from India – where my parents had travelled together in search of a route to emancipation from their life worlds. Mine was a painful journey, yet beautiful and wondrous: I began to feel alive. After three months I arrived in Cambodia, a country whose contradictions fascinated me: poverty, violence, creativity, humour, and the political engagement of the youth. Volunteering in Cambodian

NGOs as a training specialist allowed me to step outside of the ‘box’ in some respects, yet I continued to be protected by a shield of privilege – as a Westerner and a traveller. Also, I found that I missed a European life made up of cinema, museums, workshops, conferences, art, and so on... in short what my father would call ‘culture’. This had been at the root of my hiding from knowing, because in my primary context I had learnt to idealize, desire and fear knowledge. Pleasure and ‘work *jouissance*’ (Richardson, 1997, p. 136, italics in original) were unmentionable. A travel friend asked whether I had considered studying for another Masters in Cambridge. Nothing could have sounded more absurd. But again, this rang a bell and, mulling over these thoughts, I drew my sabbatical to a close.

Undertaking a doctoral research programme in (quintessentially) British English seemed the step required to challenge my strategy of hiding from knowing. This would allow me to put my language studies at a prestigious high school in Milan to good use, and test my professional capabilities at a higher level. Although I initially decided to conduct my research through another language with more functional goals in mind, this ultimately created a space of possibility for a ‘revolution’, as understood by Julia Kristeva (1974, cited in Smith, 1998, p. 21), in my ways of knowing.

### **From ‘performing’ to becoming: a journey of transformation**

At the outset, my key research interest was in professionalism and training. I came across the main debates in the field: neoliberal discourses and pedagogical concerns in higher education (Barnett, 2011; 2000; Readings, 1996), reductive views of adult learning and employability (Furedi, 2009; Doyle, 2003), and technical training and professionalism in education (Ball and Olmedo, 2013; Gewirtz *et al.*, 2009; Ball, 2003). At first these discourses made sense in relation to my experience as a university student, and the managerial understanding of adult learning encountered in my work as trainer.<sup>7</sup> But gradually these too became general statements, as the co-operative workshop – and my own reflexive work – began to produce ‘embodied narratives’ concerning the more unconscious territories of our imaginations of knowing.

Barnett (2011; 2000) has discussed the blurred area of learning *as* becoming in higher education: a process he describes as ineffable, emergent, and dynamic. As I became more aware of the dilemmas that I had been experiencing for many years, I wished to make sense *for myself* of Barnett’s participative, self-ironic and holistic knowledge of ‘being’ (Barnett, 2011, p. 13) – where ‘being’ is understood to mean being unique humans. Barnett adopts a political stance in response to a linguistic power structure that has come to rule out, he argues,

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<sup>7</sup> I am thinking of discourses of measurement, testing, performance, leadership, and talent management that also represented quite a large component of the MA programme that I took.

all that which is not overtly explicit, causing a ‘loss of mystery’ (ibid. p. 15) in the pedagogical discourse on knowledge.<sup>8</sup>

This resonated with my own detached knowing which had met with such apparent success throughout my experience in education, both as a student and as a trainer. Little by little, my focus began to shift from professionalism to what it is to know and become in our working lives. Hence my thesis explores the route of reflexivity and embodiment of the research questions along which I ‘lived’ my quest for becoming. In the words of Rainer Maria Rilke:

And what matters is to live everything. *Live* the questions for now. Perhaps then you will gradually, without noticing it, live your way into the answer, one distant day in the future.  
(Rilke, 1929, p. 17)

I humbly call this dissertation a story of on-going transformation and self-integration (Winnicott, 1965): one’s relationship with knowing cannot be separated from the development of one’s own metaphor (Bateson, 1977) – or identity. The kind of research work that I chose to conduct is not a form of therapy – a possible criticism of the research as Merrill and West (2009) recognize –, but the noblest expression of adult learning. During the research, self and knowing became keywords for exploring potentially complementary relationships between the personal *and* professional, subjective *and* objective, aesthetic *and* cognitive. The research work threw up key issues for professional practice, such as authority, power, gendered ways of knowing, and our relationship with cultural objects.

An interesting development for me as researcher was coming to accept that my questions will continue to be with me for a long time, because they are good (true, complex, legitimate, see H. von Foerster, 1972) questions, and deserve to be kept open to guide me in my professional life far beyond the duration of this doctoral study.

### **The methodology used**

I chose to adopt a co-operative inquiry method (Heron, 1996) with a biographical orientation to it (Formenti, 2009; 2008), because this allowed me to tackle complex issues in a way that challenged my own position as an ‘expert’ researcher, raising questions of identity, power, authenticity, love, unknowing, and the unconscious. I like to think of the research space as a ‘wild forest’ of research experience planted by me as the researcher. This forest was multi-layered and alive, interactively co-created with all those who participated in the research, and inhabited by the spirits of significant others, memories, fears and desires, bodies, and objects. Such circularity between the dispositive – the context initially set up – and learning – what

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<sup>8</sup> The post-seventeenth-century rise of modern science, secularism and the specialization of scientific knowledge have been identified as precursors of this loss. Concerning the recent reductive turn in higher education, see also Biesta’s critique of *learnification* (2010), West *et al.* (2007) and Molesworth *et al.* (2010).

persons do with this context – is, in my view, intrinsic to the constructivist perspective (Fabbri and Munari, 2005; Maturana, 1990; Maturana and Varela, 1987; Bateson, 1979).

In extreme synthesis, the research methodology comprised a series of six narrative workshops based on John Heron's model of holistic knowing (Heron, 1996), conducted at two different universities over an eight-month period with volunteer adult subjects studying and/or working in the education sector at large.

The workshops were designed to explore participants 'learning biographies', drawing on the tradition of biographical studies with reflexive groups of adult educators founded by Pierre Dominicé (2007; 2000). According to Dominicé, adult educators are a professional population that has changed dramatically in recent years due to increasing diversification in roles (instructors, trainers, tutors, coaches, counsellors etc., in formal, non-formal and even informal settings), settings (public and private enterprises and services related to lifelong learning) and activities (teaching, but also coaching, mentoring, tutoring, supervising, guidance and counselling). Therefore, I used an opportunistic sampling strategy to recruit a diverse group of participants – in Bicocca by direct invitation through my supervisor and Head of the Graduate School, Laura Formenti, and my colleague, Francesco Cappa, and in Canterbury via an open call issued by faculty directors and the graduate school. Two voluntary groups were formed: one in Italy at Milano-Bicocca University, and the other in Britain at Canterbury Christ Church University. My intuition was that a diverse sample would generate more blurred areas throughout the research process and cause me (and possibly the participants) more moments of *déplacement* or displacement (Fabbri and Formenti, 1991) vis-à-vis my previously held views as a learner, educator and researcher – hence, I anticipated more and richer learning from a constructivist point of view. The opportunistic sampling was also dictated by the need to engage co-researchers in a demanding research experience, designed to take place over a relatively long timeframe and to be open-ended, which I called *Embodied Narratives Workshop: the relationship to knowing, and the professional self* (see Appendix n. 2). The proposal attracted a heterogeneous group of participants: younger and older professionals in formal education, social work, research, career guidance and art therapy. Each group adapted the methodology to suit its own characteristics, inventing ways of co-ordinating or 'linguaging', and becoming a research group in the process (Maturana, 1990). The fact that part of the recruitment was by personal invitation clearly caused an element of bias in the composition of the sample, however this was also fruitful, as it allowed pre-existing issues of authority and power relations to be brought to light and addressed, particularly in relation to the personae<sup>9</sup> of my co-facilitator and myself. More generally, the

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<sup>9</sup> The Collins Cobuild English Dictionary for Advanced Learners (2001) defines *persona* as the aspect of someone's character or nature that they present to others, and which may be in contrast with their real character or nature.

fact that Francesco and I brought different constructed identities to the research process, itself became a key theme of discussion in my thesis.

During the research, metaphor became a key epistemological tool. Specifically, I drew on the work of neo-Piagetian scholars Fabbri and Munari (2010), using their *Metaphors of knowledge*, a book with a set of illustrated cards representing 10 metaphors that provide a starting point for reflexively exploring one's strategies of knowing. I am deeply thankful to Professors Donata Fabbri and Alberto Munari for authorizing me to reproduce some of these images here (see Appendix n. 1), and the reader is invited to consult them when the cards are referred to in the text.<sup>10</sup> Using these metaphors coagulated meaning in a complex way – bringing together emotion, perception, intuition, and cognitive thinking –, and I began to find additional metaphors that helped me to move forward in my inquiry. As validated academic text-objects, the cards also encouraged me to use other cultural objects 'evocatively' – via the technique of free association (Bollas, 2009) – in biographical conversations with participants and family members. In combining all these elements, I developed a methodology of my own that enabled me to integrate subjective and objective knowing, an outcome that was deeply liberating for me as I went through my own process of becoming an academic researcher.

### **Introducing some theoretical friends**

In line with the circular method of 'spiralling' introduced above, I have chosen to organize or to 'shape' my dissertation to reflect the dynamic unfolding of my enquiry. Hence, there is no one single chapter offering a traditional background literature review, given that my theoretical thinking and theoretical sources continued to emerge and evolve throughout the entire research process. The main theoretical concepts underpinning my work are presented in detail at different points along the 'spiral', but I briefly introduce the reader to them here so as to signpost in advance the direction the thesis will take as the chapters progress.

Some theoretical friends that I met along the way shed light on knowing and its influences on selves and professional lives: John Heron, Bernard Charlot and Donald Winnicott each provided insights into a different facet of my research topic.

Charlot in his book *Du Rapport au Savoir: Éléments Pour une Théorie*, published in 1997 in Paris, speaks about what I have translated<sup>11</sup> as the 'relationship with knowing' or how we each relate to knowledge and, at the same time, to ourselves, others and the world in which

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<sup>10</sup> The book draws on the research and training work that Fabbri and Munari have been conducting in both academic and organizational contexts since the 1980s, in workshop settings called Laboratories of Operative Epistemology (LEO) designed to host site-specific action-based research on knowledge and identity.

<sup>11</sup> During the proofreading process, I realized that a grammatically sound translation of Charlot's expression 'rapport au savoir' would be 'relationship with knowing', although my initial translation of 'relationship to knowing' evoked more clearly for me the active role of the subject in 'relating to' knowledge. I have thus maintained the latter nuance in the title of this thesis, and adopted the more correct form in the main body of my dissertation.



we live. Drawing on a series of studies about learning in schools, Charlot brings a sociological analysis to bear on how knowing triggers processes of self-making in relationships with significant others, and contributes to changing how we imagine our place in the world. His sociological views are deeply relational and theorize a subject with a story, emotions and partly unconscious feelings, who develops within social structures that ultimately do not determine his or her actions.

Heron (1996; 1992) appealed to me on account of his idea that different ‘kinds of knowledge’ are interrelated; he identifies four modes of knowing that extend in two directions: towards self-knowledge, and knowledge of the wider system of life. His is a sort of systemic view of the sacred unity of being, which resonates with the work of Bateson (1979; 1972). Although Heron’s schemes and hierarchies of knowledge interest me less, I took up his notion of the interrelationship between the sensuous, the imagination/intuition, the rational and the practical that mutually nurture each other in a spiralling developmental process. The ‘composition’, as Formenti calls it (2009; 1998), of these modes of knowledge informs more holistic theories of knowing – epistemology –, and becoming – ontology. More integrated persons (and social environments, such as a research space, for example) could emerge from this approach to learning, in which access to different ways of knowing enables conversations that are more respectful of the complexity of (human) life.

Winnicott (1971; 1965) provides a detailed treatment of the subject’s relationship with the other – which is alluded to by Charlot and Heron – in terms of affective dynamics. The quality of this relationship is crucial to providing a supportive environment for knowing and becoming, and to enabling the integration of a self that can express its different facets and cohere as a ‘truer’ self and more ‘playful’<sup>12</sup> learner. Becoming what Heron terms a ‘whole person’ (1992, p. 19).

I should warn the reader that the language of some of these authors is gendered, so that feminist readings of my text may find that it lends itself to accusations of gender bias. This, however, was not my intention. I set out to draw on theoretical material that spoke to my own experience in attempting to develop an understanding – from my own unique and highly personal point of view – of the stories I encountered in the course of my research. During the process, I came to acknowledge that some things might be missing from the picture that I was building up. This in itself was an outcome of my inquiry. To complement arguably more masculine narratives – of acting, signifying, integrating with a world or retreating from it, such as that of Charlot – with a more feminist sensitivity, I therefore decided to invite

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<sup>12</sup> In this thesis, when the terms ‘play’, ‘playful’, ‘playing’ etc. appear in inverted commas they specifically refer to Winnicott’s (1971) concept of play as associated with creative activity and the search for self. According to Winnicott, both in play and in cultural experience ‘a paradox is involved which needs to be accepted, tolerated, and not resolved’ (ibid. p. 71), and which concerns the separateness yet connectedness of psychic and external reality. Accepting this paradox is key to enabling creativity, wholeness, and a sense of self-worth. The resulting implications for my work are amply discussed in Chapter Nine.

Belenky to the conversation, with the aim of becoming more attentive to issues of voice and power: of particular salience to the research theme is Belenky and colleagues' (1986) work on women's ways of knowing.

### **Lost and found in translation**

Having to write in another language is undoubtedly a limiting factor. During the early months of my research, I wrote in my diary that English made me stupid, given that I was slow to read and to process information, and even slower to write. My flow of thought was blocked by foreign words that did not make any connection with my story, my ear, or my embodied relationship with knowing. Writing was not automatic, but thoughtful (full of thought?) and truly challenging.

And yet for me this difficulty also represented an opportunity, because it challenged my relationship with myself as a 'hiding and performing' student. Because I was writing in another language that I did not command very well (and still do not), it was less feasible for me to hide behind the mask of the competent learner and performer: I was forced to make do with and to value what I had, and what I could find.<sup>13</sup> Somehow, this limitation seemed to enable me to 'know the place for the first time', to use the words of the poet T.S. Eliot (1943). As part of my re-search process, it was crucially important for me to accept feeling like Marianella Sclavi's 'clumsy researcher' (Sclavi, 2003, p. 100, my translation). I learnt to lose face, and be self-ironical about my own limits in knowing and embodying a professional persona.

As correctness mattered less – it was 'less about me' (Hunt, 2016, p. 176, my translation) –, I could increasingly listen more to the other and to what was happening between us, becoming more attentive to what could be learnt. 'Embarrassments' (Sclavi, 2003, p. 188) that arose with my participants, my supervisors, and with people I talked to, became meaningful or significant incidents/accidents, in which clashes between different frameworks of reference created the conditions for greater *dia*-logue between mindsets. This may well be a feminist way of doing research, given that Richardson too speaks about 'a non-alienating practice' (Richardson, 1997, p. 153), driven by the pleasure of composing poetic and dramatic forms of representation with a view to 'experiencing the self as a sociological knower/constructor' (ibid).

I increasingly allowed myself to write poetic texts and use a more imaginative style, becoming more daring and less afraid of not being 'intellectual' enough in the terms of an

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<sup>13</sup> I later discuss the fact that this linguistic displacement gave rise to a renegotiation of the knowledge relations between my colleague and myself as the co-operative workshops progressed, given that he was less able to 'hide' behind rhetorical devices when speaking English and had to be more direct in making his points. This prompted me to ask if strategies of 'hiding and performing' could be generalized to other academic researchers and professionals as well as myself.

accepted Western style of reasoning that is based on disconnected knowing (Belenky *et al.*, 1986).

Subconsciously or consciously, I tasked myself with giving my all to a process of stripping myself bare. My native language had previously acted as a key protective layer, in that I had always been very attentive to its use, with mixed feelings of respect for it, and shame in the event of speaking it incorrectly. This anxious veneration in my ‘relationship with language’, as Charlot calls it (1997, p. 90, my translation), was embedded in my autobiographical story, and more specifically in my relationship with my mother, a teacher in everyday life and not just by profession – and such for her own good reasons, as I shall make clear in Chapter Three. It was hugely important for me to ‘step out’ of my ‘mother-tongue’ and learn to give utterance to my thoughts and feelings in an ‘other’ language, which I experienced as a creative ‘Sunday language’ (Cupane, 2009, p. 52, my translation) offering a poetics of ‘transitional objects’ (Winnicott, 1971) – ideas and associations – with which to rewrite my self.

A feminist reader might ask how this narrative of revolt from within the interstices of language, of escape from the censorship imposed by language as a site of power and denotation (as Lacan, Kristeva, and Cixous would say),<sup>14</sup> can be reconciled with the narrative drawn on earlier in the chapter. While in this thesis I mostly understand language as the act of ‘linguaging’ through which humans fundamentally co-ordinate themselves with one another (Maturana, 1990), at times I call on other theoretical friends to be reminded of the limits of this medium too, and of the possibilities of knowing and becoming that can germinate ‘between the lines’ – such as in the rhythm of poetry, for example, and in different non-linguistic representational forms (Richardson, 1997). In this sense, the richly aesthetic exposition of this thesis, which draws on the poetic use of language and is accompanied by images of various kinds, poses a challenge from within to the ‘*graphein*’<sup>15</sup> in the autobiographical approach, undercutting it, questioning it, and nurturing it through the use of other media.

My encounter with the writing of Virginia Woolf, and particularly her autobiographical reflections on the limits of words and what seems to elude us, gifted me with the comforting insight that the quest requires no linguistic self-censorship, but needs only courage, irony and truthful seeking. Woolf speaks of sometimes feeling, during epiphanies or ‘moments of being’, a sense of integration, beyond words, with ‘a spiritually transcendent truth [...]

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<sup>14</sup> I have not consulted the original sources. I read about these authors in Smith (1998) and in Sellers (1994).

<sup>15</sup> *Grapphein* (the Greek for ‘to write’ or ‘to paint’) is also the title of a reputable adult education programme held annually at the Libera Università dell’Autobiografia (The Free University of Autobiography), founded by Duccio Demetrio and Saverio Tutino in Anghiari, Italy, in 1998. In the course of four writing workshops, groups of adult learners – teachers, social workers etc. – write individual autobiographies, as both memoirs and a means of probing aspects of their lives.

See: [http://www.lua.it/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=152&Itemid=96](http://www.lua.it/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=152&Itemid=96).

perceived in a flash of intuition’ (Schulkind, 1985, p. 17). Her words counselled me to trust the process while mistrusting apparent ‘truths’ or ‘identities’, *but yet* to listen to what made the deepest sense to me.

Behind the cotton wool is hidden a pattern; that we – I mean all human beings – are connected with this; that the whole world is a work of art; that we are parts of the work of art. *Hamlet* or a Beethoven quartet is the truth about this vast mass that we call the world. But there is no Shakespeare, there is no Beethoven; certainly and empathically there is no God; we are the words; we are the music; we are the thing itself. (Woolf, 1985, p. 72)

### **The structure of the thesis**

Because my work was informed by constructivist views (Maturana, 1990; Bateson, 1979; 1972), I adopted a circular approach in carrying it out: I was thus fully involved in the process of knowledge construction rather than reasoning about things from a ‘disconnected’ perspective (Belenky *et al.*, 1986). This poses the question of how to do justice to this spiralling dynamic (Heron, 1996) in my account of the process, given that language – ‘other than poetry’ (Bateson, 1972, p. 138) – is linear, and only represents ‘arcs of circuits’ (ibid. p. 145) – which is why we need art.

I have therefore chosen to organize my arguments in the shape of a spiral, to ‘*show* [...] rather than simply talking about’ (Richardson, 1997, p. 73, italics in original) how they unfolded and how I, meanwhile, flourished. I ask readers to be open to this approach, while I on my part undertake to provide all the necessary signposting throughout the text. This means that, as already stated above, the literature review will unfold in parallel with my account of the research, as will my description of the methodologies adopted and part of the autobiographical strand of my enquiry. Therefore, the thesis is structured as follows.

Chapter One presents the epistemological roots from which the construction of my methodology grew, introducing a constructivist understanding of knowledge. Within this framework, I locate my auto/biographical approach, and ask questions about the co-operative inquiry method.

Chapter Two reviews key theoretical approaches to conceptualizing ways of knowing, an exercise that prepared me to observe narrated and lived experiences of knowing and becoming in education, through this particular lens. The main authors drawn on are Charlot (1997), Beillerot and colleagues (1996) Heron (1996; 1992), and Belenky and colleagues (1986).

Chapter Three offers an analysis of my primary learning context and biography, based on interviews with my family and autobiographical writing. I recollect memories of my schooling, higher education, and work as a trainer, and become reflexive about my fears/desires of objective knowledge and ‘culture’. I situate the genesis of the quest in my

travels and in the ‘reasons of the heart’ (Bateson, 1972, p. 129) that called me to engage in doctoral research.

Chapter Four provides a detailed treatment of the methodological choices underpinning the narrative co-operative workshops and the activities making them up. This is introduced by a description of my initial feelings and expectations, and how my co-facilitator Francesco Cappa (from now on, Francesco) came to collaborate on the project. My data generation strategies and tools, corpus of ‘data’, and methods of analysis are all explained.

Chapter Five is Case Study 1, produced in relation to the inquiry undertaken with the participants in Bicocca. A *meso* level of analysis is brought to bear, meaning that I focus on interaction among group members and look for ‘embarrassment’ (Sclavi, 2003, pp. 188-215) and metaphors. I propose a five-step pattern through which the participants and facilitators learned to co-ordinate themselves and carry out research together as a co-operative inquiry group – as a ‘we’. Chapter Six is a continuation of the Bicocca case study, but here I analyse participants’ experience at the *micro* level. Focusing on the material of two subjects, I examine their relationship with knowing and self-construction as they themselves narrated and constructed it, via a process of integration of reason and heart, de-idealization of experts, and self-integration.

Chapters Seven and Eight form Case Study 2 concerning the co-operative inquiry conducted in Canterbury. They follow the same structure as the Bicocca chapters and pursue identical aims. I identified a similar pattern of steps at the group level and this brought more depth to my understanding of the co-operative inquiry process – as in Bateson’s double description (1979, p. 64). In Chapter Eight, I again bring a micro perspective to bear on two participants’ experience of the research, focusing on the themes of uncovering stereotypes, composing fragments into broader ‘arcs’ of learning – insider/outsider, art/reason, experience/discourse – , and integrating parts of the self.

Chapter Nine offers a theoretical discussion of the concepts of self and authenticity, examining how Winnicott’s (1971; 1965) ideas of the ‘transitional object’ and ‘transitional space’ might be borrowed to think about the relationships in which knowing and self-making happen, and how we might view culture as a resource. I draw on the work of several scholars who have researched the theme of knowing and the self, situating my own academic contribution within the area of scholarship on social learning theories.

Chapter Ten may be thought of as Case Study 3, in which I analyse qualitative materials that I produced during the co-operative workshops – particularly a photographic diary of my research experience – and analyse them creatively, representing and re-writing my own relationship with knowing and my professional self (Richardson, 1997), by challenging ‘expert’ status and power relations vis-à-vis my supervisors, colleagues, and participants. I then give a reflexive and reflective account of the ethical issues that emerge from my study,

and articulate the implications of adopting a relational reflexive stance within cooperative inquiry.

In the Conclusion, I draw together the threads of the spiralling process. After outlining an interdisciplinary conceptualization of self and knowing, and my method of uncertainty, I propose a research methodology with the formative potential to challenge professionals' narrow and self-constraining relationships with knowledge, by leading them to embrace multiple ways of knowing that engage other dimensions alongside the intellect. I finish by briefly discussing the broader relevance of my research findings and the potential for applying them to areas of education and beyond; finally, I also touch on the place and outcomes of this doctoral research project within my own personal learning journey.



## *Chapter One*

### **The epistemological roots of my research**

#### **Introduction**

In tracing the epistemological roots underpinning my choice of research methodology, I looked to the work of scholars from outside the field of education, and even from outside the human sciences. Albeit within other disciplines such as biology and epistemology, these authors offer key ideas about how humans learn as living organisms, and members of networks of relationships. The implicit question that I needed to answer in order to define my research setting was: how do I believe that humans know? I myself was setting out to construct knowledge that I could be ‘satisfied’ with, and that might be deemed ‘scientific’ by an academic community. This epistemological point of departure prompted me to construct a communicative context, in which ‘knowing’ could be explored via the generation of fresh critical thinking and ‘good [inclusive and reflexive] stories’ (Merrill and West, 2009, p. 113). This chapter introduces the reader to my epistemological position at the outset of my research journey, a sort of prequel to the auto/biographical<sup>16</sup> account of my unfolding sense of knowing and professional becoming that forms the main body of this thesis.

#### **Epistemologically situating my enquiry**

Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln have provided a clear framework, within qualitative research, for explicitly acknowledging the perspective of the researcher as knower. In their fourth edition of *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research* (2011), they defined qualitative research as ‘a situated activity that locates the observer in the world’ and consists of a ‘set of interpretive, material practices’ which, while making the world visible, also ‘transform the world’ (2011, p. 3). With Denzin and Lincoln, I find it helpful to think of the product of the interpretative researcher’s labour as a complex performative text:

The product of the interpretative bricoleur’s labour is a complex, quilt-like bricolage, a reflexive collage or montage ... a performance text, or a sequence of representations connecting the parts to the whole. (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011, p. 6)

In these authors’ view, we are now traversing the ‘eighth moment’ in the history of qualitative research in North America, a time of methodologically contested positions that is characterized by an ‘embarrassment of choices’ (2011, p. 3). Significantly, in some new

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<sup>16</sup> Throughout the dissertation, I use the ‘/’ in ‘auto/biography’ in certain contexts and omit it in others; specifically, I describe my perspective as ‘autobiographical’ when the focus is on my own story as a researcher, while I introduce the slash to flag exploration of how my story is interrelated with the biographies of others (Merrill and West, 2009).



(though arguably less mainstream) areas of qualitative research – which tend to receive less recognition in Europe – the researcher is called on to develop ‘critical conversations about democracy, race, gender, class, nation states, globalization, freedom, and community’ (ibid). Hence, qualitative research becomes a ‘politically charged space’ (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005, p. 6), in which pressures from both inside and outside the research community to re-establish evidence-based and normative methods of inquiry threaten to ‘erase the positive developments of the past 30 years’ (ibid). Overall, Denzin and Lincoln’s work made me aware that my research choices were not neutral, and that my chosen methodologies situated me politically within a diverse and contested academic space. Questions of participation (Heron, 1996) and of what knowledge is produced, and for whom, prompted me to reflect on my own point of view, in its conscious and less conscious aspects. I therefore take it as axiomatic that behind the research process ‘stands the personal biography of the researcher’ who ‘approaches the world with a set of ideas, a framework (theory, ontology) that specifies a set of questions (epistemology) that he or she then examines in specific ways (methodology, analysis)’ (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005, p. 21).

Denzin and Lincoln (ibid. p. 22) suggest that there are ‘four major interpretative paradigms [...] positivist and post-positivist, constructivist-interpretative, critical (Marxist, emancipatory), and feminist-poststructural’. I formulated my own questions around knowing and becoming from a constructivist perspective, viewing knowing (epistemology) and living (ontology) as interconnected (Maturana and Varela, 1987), and language as connotative, creating both the observer and a shared world of human action. Constructivism, as articulated by the authors that I go on to introduce in this chapter, works for me and has become a satisfying theory (Munari, 1993), a perspective that I now deeply embody.

Questions of knowledge and of (not) knowing became very important and problematic during my own history of learning and becoming an adult; in the course of my research, I found that constructivist theory helped me to tell the story of this process of learning and becoming, to which knowing and living are key. Adopting the constructivist perspective has given me the opportunity to change my way of living by changing my way of knowing, and vice versa, within a single unified process. It has also offered me a framework for viewing established knowledge as *uncertain*, partial, and never given, and this has had a liberating effect on me as a learner.

The challenge of complexity<sup>17</sup> is an epistemological discourse that emerged in the mid-1980s in the work of Maturana, von Foerster, and Morin (among others), reflecting a new awareness of ‘the irreducible uncertainty of our knowledge’ (Bocchi and Ceruti, 1985a, p. 7) and

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<sup>17</sup> This is also the title of a book in Italian by Bocchi and Ceruti, which from its publication in 1985 bore a strong influence on local academic discourse about complexity theories.

processes of knowing.<sup>18</sup> In those years, scholars from a variety of disciplines contributed to a key discussion on research and epistemology: these authors invited us to become reflective about our approach to knowing (i.e., our way of interacting with the world and with ourselves). Complexity allows for epistemological recursivity: our propositions and theories do not access the world but construct it, and as knowers we are implicated, not least ethically and aesthetically, in our every act of description. Constructivism is thus an epistemology of epistemology, as von Foerster (1981) would put it, in that it reflects on its own premises. This aspect of the constructivist paradigm attracted me, given that my own difficulties and dissatisfactions with knowing were related to an ambiguity I had learnt: a burning passion for, intertwined with a defensive rejection of, cultural objects, ‘expert’ knowledge, shared experience, the sensual, and engaging in creative expression with others. Complexity theories enabled me to reflectively attend to my own learner biography, in its more and less conscious aspects, and reposition myself in relation to it.

### **The constructivist account of how we know**

In relation to biographical research, Formenti (1998) has observed that different schools of constructivist thinking (including psycho-cognitive, psycho-social, and epistemological approaches) share an emphasis on unpacking the constitutive and generative processes of knowledge. In order to go beyond simplistic contrapositions between individual/society, with respect to which alternative versions of constructivism situate themselves differently, Formenti proposed ‘verifying the epistemological soundness and operative “viability”<sup>19</sup> of constructivist concepts with relevance to biographical discourse’ (ibid. p. 91, my translation). Her overview of constructivism helped me to clarify the epistemological foundations of my study, and identify the viable constructivist concepts that I could draw on (and that I needed to attend to) in designing, implementing, and analysing the outcomes of, my research. In this context, I made a choice in relation to my theory of language, as I go on to outline in the following paragraphs. As advocated by Formenti, I adopted a set of key ideas about how knowledge might be ‘constructed’ in my biographical study: namely, knowing is acting, *linguaging*, (structurally) coupling, and (provisionally) balancing.

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<sup>18</sup> I learnt about this approach while preparing my Master’s thesis on the resilience of non-traditional students, thanks to my second supervisor, Laura Formenti. This fortuitous encounter made me curious about less linear and dualistic ways of speaking about the world (a more challenging approach!); hence, although I do not bring Formenti’s ideas to bear in analysing my research material, I draw on them to articulate my own underlying epistemological stance.

<sup>19</sup> This concept was proposed by E. von Glasersfeld (1981) and refers to the capacity of an idea to survive as long as we can use it to make sense of experience. Formenti reminds us that, within the constructivist paradigm, any scientific theory or proposition may be considered viable, provided it supports circular interaction between the knower and the known.

### **a) Knowing is acting**

Knowing is a process that concerns the ‘operation of a living system in its domain of structural coupling, i.e. in its domain of existence’ (Maturana, 1990, p. 95), and entails continuous interaction with the ‘medium’ or background context in which the living being realizes its domain of existence. In other words, knowing corresponds to the process of living: all living beings are cognitive (cognizing) beings. For human beings, the ongoing active construction of reality (knowing) is closely intertwined with construction of the self, and hence with the construction of structures and strategies of knowing. The processes of ‘self’ and ‘world’ construction cannot be separated, as early recognized by Jean Piaget (1937). The self and the world are the simultaneous outcomes of the same action. The distinction between the two is only drawn by an *observer*, which means that it is an operation of description in the domain of language. Thanks to language, knowers have ‘the capacity to say something about themselves, to interact with parts of themselves as though these were distinct and separate from [the knowers’] functioning’ (Formenti, 1998, p. 92, my translation).

### **b) Linguaging**

According to one of the leading exponents of constructivism, Chilean biologist Humberto Maturana (1990), at every moment in time, human life may be said to happen at two different levels of operation: the physical (‘living’) and the symbolic (‘linguistic’). Language allows the ‘recursive consensual coordination of consensual coordinations of actions or distinctions’ (Maturana, 1990, p. 93). Maturana thus coins the term ‘linguaging’, defining it as the *action of language* which creates recursive coordination with other human beings. As observed by Formenti,

The notion of linguaging contrasts with a conception of language as the expression of sounds or words, and also with language as representation, instead placing emphasis on the linguistic medium as a reciprocal coordination of actions. (Formenti, 1998, p. 122, my translation)

As humans, we live immersed in language. We can never get out of language as linguaging, because it is part of our human condition. We cannot access experience through language because these are two separate domains of human existence (albeit connected through the body).<sup>20</sup> Explanation remains in the domain of explanation and co-ordination, thus in the domain of communication. This has a key implication for autobiographical research: self-

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<sup>20</sup> We should think of linguaging as more than verbal language, given that it comprises all forms of reciprocal coordination through symbolic action. Dance, music, and the visual and performative arts are all part of human linguaging, although we may perceive them to be more closely connected to lived bodily experience than spoken language. Using these other media of language in educational/research settings is one of the themes explored in this thesis.

knowledge is not a form of direct access to lived experience, on the contrary it happens as a second level of recursion in language. This is not to say, however, that language happens in abstraction; rather, for Maturana, ‘interactions in language are structural interactions’ (Maturana, 1990, p. 94) – that is to say, through languaging, we impact on one another’s bodies.

I should note in passing that of course there are other theories of language and gendered language, such as those of Cixous and Kristeva.<sup>21</sup> These perspectives critically question what kind of language connotes and brings forth what sort of world, and how the possibilities for being and knowing are biased by the social, political and cultural order (Smith, 1998; Sellers, 1994). However, this does not mean that they are in contradiction with the ideas outlined above. Indeed what we refer to as the social, political and cultural order is not just ‘out there’: it too translates into structures in our bodies. Maturana’s analysis concerns the micro and biological levels, which informs a systemic account encompassing multiple levels. What Julia Kristeva, drawing on psychoanalytical understandings, terms the pre-verbal ‘semiotic’ that features in the ‘symbolic’ order of language and speech (and in other non-verbal signifying systems such as music and painting), corresponds to the sensing body in the biological theories of Maturana and Varela (1987). ‘All knowing gives rise to a relational process (with things, with self, with others)’ (Formenti, 1998, p. 92, my translation). Self-knowledge is therefore social, like any form of knowing; it is primarily a relational process, on the grounds that the primacy of action determines the primacy of inter-action.

### **c) Structural coupling**

All living beings depend on their environment/medium, with which they go through a continuous process of structural coupling as they create themselves. ‘I call structural coupling or adaptation the relationship of dynamic structural correspondence with the medium in which a unity conserves its class identity’ (Maturana, 1990, p. 64). To reformulate this concept in more everyday language, all living beings are constantly engaged in a process of structural change with the aim of maintaining a sufficient level of equilibrium in their own internal states to remain alive. In so doing, they actively change (the structures of) the environment supporting their process of living, up to the moment in which this dynamic coherence ends with death. Thus, death ends the coupling. In this view, a living system is identified by an observer both as a system that preserves its own organization (identity) and structural coupling, and as a sequence of ‘moments’ in its ontogenic drift (the constant process of becoming) through its medium. It is the interaction between a system and its medium that causes both system and medium to be as they are at a given moment, and not in

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<sup>21</sup> As already noted in the Introduction, I have not consulted the original sources. I read about the work of Hélène Cixous in Sellers (1994), and about that of Julia Kristeva in Smith (1998).

any other way. This is key to understanding the process via which each individual (human) life unfolds in its interconnectedness with the natural (and social) world. Knowledge may be thought of as an appropriate action implemented by a living system in present circumstances, an action of reciprocal adaptation to other beings and contexts... ‘all living systems are cognitive systems’ (Formenti, 1998, p. 92, my translation). Maturana argued that our becoming always happens in the context of a relationship with others:

When two or more autopoietic [self-producing] systems interact recurrently, and in each of them a dynamic structure follows a course of change contingent to the history of its interactions with the others, there is a co-ontogenic structural drift [...] a domain of consensual coordinations of actions or distinctions in an environment. (Maturana, 1990, p. 92)<sup>22</sup>

Languaging makes it possible to say something about living, or rather about one’s relationship with living, in other words to tell the story of human beings’ structural coupling with their environments; it ‘makes possible, indeed inevitable, the production of a “biography”, that is to say a possible interpretation of the ontogenic process, and therefore of one’s knowledge construction path’ (Formenti, 1998, p. 93, my translation). Narrative brings forth a world and ‘subjects’ in that world as systems of distinctions.

#### **d) Provisional balance**

To illustrate his concept of ‘ontogenic structural drift’, Maturana (1990, p. 72) used the metaphor of a boat at sea which does not move in a predefined direction but drifts as a function of the winds and waves that it encounters. For as long as it continues to be organized as a boat, the course of its drifting will be determined by a continuously emergent system of boat-wind-waves. A core constructivist notion is that of the ‘necessary uncertainty’ (ibid. p. 71) of operations, processes, and products of knowledge. A possible means of observing knowing is to create cognitive *déplacement* (which might be translated into English as displacement), that is, to bring imbalance to a static situation, description/theory or viewpoint, so that another observational perspective can emerge, and hence a different situation, description or theory.

We only feel the need to construct knowledge when we experience an obstacle to which we cannot apply any of the taken-for-granted, automatic, comfortable (and hidden) ideas we previously held, and this crisis (a crisis of knowledge – but also emotional: it is disturbing) generates the possibility of new thinking and new knowing. This aspect of knowing is treated

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<sup>22</sup> Maturana’s discussion of languaging is based on his theory of autopoiesis, which in turn stemmed from his research on the connection between perception and action.

both theoretically and operationally in Fabbri and Munari's (1990) cultural psychology, as I outline later in the chapter.

### **e) Reality emerges in conversation**

Constructivist epistemology places objectivity 'between parentheses', viewing it not as *given*, but as *constructed* (Formenti, 1998, p. 94). In constructivist epistemology, a privileged strategy of knowing is to engage in conversation. Languaging generates meaning, observation, and self-knowing via recursive sequences of combined and co-ordinated actions and distinctions, which give form to reality as a shared domain of existence.

The etymology of the word conversation, *cum-versari* (in Latin, wandering or walking in company with someone), suggests that the very essence of the human activity of talking is 'conviviality': living with others (Formenti, 2008, p. 181). Hence the dimension of care characterizing this cognitive action, which resembles what Belenky and colleagues defined in educational contexts as connected knowing (1986, pp. 112-130). What is distinctive (and difficult) about connected knowing as a transformative practice is that it requires truly listening to the other, and to what may lie behind words, before formulating judgements concerning the best argument (Belenky and Stanton, 2000). Relationships lie at the heart of conversation, as for example, in autobiographical work, in which subjects essentially position themselves in relation to one another: Who am I for you? Who are you for me? (Formenti, 2014). I like to quote Heinz von Foerster's double imperative because it clearly expresses what is at stake in generative conversations:

The ethical imperative: 'Act always so as to increase the number of choices'.

The aesthetic imperative: 'If you desire to see, learn how to act'. (von Foerster, 1973, p. 55, my translation)

Formenti reminds us that: 'when the object of conversation is participants themselves, with their interactive, cognitive, affective, and value processes, as well as their interpersonal relationships, then conversations become privileged sites of identity formation' (1998, p. 100, my translation). Given that language is connotative, human phenomena of meaning, observing, self-consciousness, ethics, and even education, happen in conversation, that is to say, in recursive sequences of combined and coordinated actions and distinctions. Therefore, it is possible for multiple linguistic realities to co-exist, depending on how many observers are available to describe them and what multiverses are created.

### **Formenti's biographically oriented co-operative inquiry**

In my study, I drew on Formenti's constructivist and systemic method of biographically oriented<sup>23</sup> co-operative inquiry (Formenti, 2008), which combines co-operative inquiry (Heron, 1996) and operative epistemology (Fabbri and Munari, 2005) with biographical approaches.<sup>24</sup>

The setting of a group of participants as co-researchers is designed to foster collective, 'intelligent' (meaning connective, from the Latin *interligo*) understandings, developed with (and not only about) the research subjects. From a constructivist perspective, conducting co-operative inquiry means leading a formative kind of research process, characterised by circularity between the material dispositive and processes of *formation*:<sup>25</sup> the objects, activities, and times that I set up to form the research scene (as I have the power to do as facilitator), and how subjects respond to them, are in a recursive relationship with one another. They create and change one another. The subjects' response not only offers me information about them, but also challenges me and gives me insight into how the dispositive is working. Furthermore, if I am responsive in turn, this feedback will inform my subsequent action, in line with a pedagogical imaginary of formation as co-evolution with the context.<sup>26</sup> Individual minds and the 'collective mind' are composed, according to Formenti, through voicing and inter-subjective dialogue (2008).

At a conceptual level, this method seeks to reconcile the dualistic contrasts that often restrict our understanding of the world and of ourselves, to form 'cybernetic complementarities' which are, according to Keeney, 'reframings in terms of recursive process of the distinctions people draw' (1983, p. 94). The spiral symbolizes the recursive and complementary perspective informing Formenti's research method (2008, pp. 184-186). This method unfolds in four cyclical stages (based on Heron's model comprising experiential, presentational, propositional and practical kinds of knowledge, 1996): 'authentic' experience, through which

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<sup>23</sup> As Formenti would say, 'biography' means to remember that there is a past, a present and future and that each of the subjects involved is the bearer of a sort of continuous inner narrative of dynamic self-development. A dispositive is biographically oriented when this self-narrative is made available to the participants by evoking it through the formative situation (Formenti, private conversation).

<sup>24</sup> The European authors on autobiographical research and formative practices that Formenti (2009) mentions as her main influences are Duccio Demetrio (2008, 2000, 1996), Marie Christine Josso (1991), and Gaston Pineau (2000, 1998). Other key influences include the *Pedagogia del Corpo* (Body Pedagogy) developed in Italy by Ivano Gamelli (2005), but also the philosophical practices of Romano Mådera (Mådera and Tarca, 2003), Jungian psychology, and intercultural pedagogy.

<sup>25</sup> The Italian term '*formazione*' has two possible etymologies: the Greek *morfè*, and the Latin *forma*. The Greek term refers to a way of being that is not necessarily restricted by time or space, while the Latin word implies the notion of acting on something within a specific timeframe and context. When used in educational contexts, '*formazione*' may be defined as 'a key cognitive dimension of adulthood, that is closely connected to the changes that characterize our developmental process. It is composed of processes, methods, and strategies of research and creativity aimed at defining the forms of action, knowledge and existence suitable to the becoming of each human being' (Fabbri, 2003, p. 340, my translation). In this thesis, I use the French '*formation*' to refer to the type of training practice with adults (Delory-Momberger, 2016) that was defined in the field of life history education and research in the seminal works of Pierre Dominicé (1990), *L'histoire de vie comme processus de formation*, and Gaston Pineau (1983). I use the English 'formation' in all other cases to refer to the subject's process of becoming.

<sup>26</sup> This dialogical process is linked to Maturana's concept of structural coupling.

subjects either participate in or remember past experience; aesthetic representation, through which experience is translated into a generative, aesthetic form of thinking; intelligent understanding, where stories are written, voiced, shared and played with by connecting the body and the mind, the individual and the collective; and deliberate action.

None of these terms is unambiguous, of course, starting from the very concept of experience, a detailed treatment of which falls outside the scope of this thesis.<sup>27</sup> I have been guided by Heron's view of experience as related to emotions or 'intense, localized affects' (Heron, 1992, p. 16) which arise in the body in response to the fulfilment or frustration of individual needs and desires. We usually say we have had an experience because we identify a unit of emotional quality, be it 'that meal, that storm, [or] that rupture of friendship' (Dewey, in Bollas, 2009, p. 81). Part of the affective mode is the capacity for feeling, which for Heron means 'the capacity of the psyche to participate in wider units of being' (Heron, 1992, p. 16), and to feel what these are about 'through attunement and resonance' (ibid). This relational capacity to know one's distinctness and unity with the differentiated other is, says Heron, what we sometimes call presence.

The authenticity of experience remains a critical issue in both qualitative (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011) and auto/biographical research (Merrill and West, 2009). Assuming a condition of disconnection that is also recognized by Bateson (1972, pp. 464-484), Formenti proposes that more 'authentic' or connected experience (i.e., one in which opposites of pleasure and displeasure, joy and suffering coexist) needs to be actively pursued, by creating the appropriate conditions for it, through practices of 'initiation or rebirth', such as meditation, contact with nature, and artwork (Formenti, 2009, p. 33, my translation). The facilitator is responsible for constructing a 'good enough' relational space (Winnicott, 1971), in which the self can present itself in a more truthful and integrated form without the fear of being ridiculed or exploited. Indeed, co-operative inquiry methods are intended by Heron to be designed and implemented on the basis of conscious political and spiritual aims: their purpose is to build a path, via a shared epistemological undertaking, towards the regeneration of more integrated and 'whole' persons (Heron, 1992, p. 19). In my own co-operative inquiry project, the interplay of aesthetic languages and verbal language was key to recognizing and recomposing Maturana's (1990) two domains of human action, the physical and the symbolic. Aesthetic representations access the sensual dimension of experience – via the 'bridge' of the metaphors we live by, as demonstrated by Lakoff and Johnson (1980), while through languaging the meaning of experience is constructed in the coordination of our actions with those of others.

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<sup>27</sup> On this point, I refer the reader to the work of American philosopher John Dewey (1938) who extensively analysed the nature of experience and its significance for education (see Cappa, 2014).



Gregory Bateson attributed great importance to the aesthetic pattern that connects all living beings:

By aesthetic, I mean responsive to the pattern which connects. [...] How are you related to this creature? What pattern connects you to it? (Bateson, 1979, p. 9)

Here, we enter the second form of knowing or aesthetic representation. Metaphors and the arts add another level of description, as Bateson would say,<sup>28</sup> and multiple descriptions have a better chance of bringing forth a rich understanding of life. ‘Abduction’ (Bateson, 1979, p. 191), for example, is a different kind of reasoning – not vertical but horizontal, not induction or deduction – in which analogies generate knowledge through other analogies, such as metaphors). John Heron acknowledged that he was inspired by Bateson’s work in developing his four modes of functioning of the psyche (affective, imaginal, conceptual and practical) which are ‘all at play to some degree at all times in waking life’ (Heron, 1992, p. 14); among these, the ‘imaginal mode’ generates aesthetic knowledge. Heron defines imaging as experiencing patterns that are grasped through intuition and imagery (ibid. pp. 16-17):

By ‘imaging’ I mean the capacity of the psyche to generate an individual viewpoint, a unique outlook on life through the use of imagery – in sense perception, memory, anticipation, dreams, visions, imagination, extrasensory perception. [...] By ‘intuiting’ I refer to the immediate, comprehensive knowing whereby the mind can grasp a field, a system or a being as a patterned unity, apprehend it in terms of figure-ground and part-whole hierarchies, see its connections with other patterns, and know what it signifies, what it means. This is the domain of intuitive grasp, holistic cognition, totalistic comprehension, metaphorical insight, immediate gnosis.

The other two stages in Formenti’s spiral of knowledge seem less difficult to define. The third stage of propositional understanding concerns the conceptual mode of knowing by discrimination, ‘the ability to categorize things’ (Heron, 1992, p. 17), and by reflection, understood as thinking about experience and ‘seeking to formulate a conceptual model that is inclusive and comprehensive’ (ibid). It is the domain of generalizations and theories, in which learners produce explanations in conversation.

Finally, Heron (1996; 1992) and later Formenti (2008) proposed leading the co-operative group to activate more explicitly the practical mode of the psyche, which involves intention and action. The fourth form of knowing is action, or ‘this piece of behaviour performed by this person’ (Heron, 1992, p. 17), which results from a positioning choice for which the

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<sup>28</sup> Bateson (1979, p. 99) writes that generating a ‘double description’, as in binocular vision, produces more ‘depth’ of information. In psycho-social research perspectives (such as that of Merrill and West, 2009), multidisciplinary narrative may be used in a similar way.

individual is personally responsible; it is intentional, because it bears a meaning that ‘relates it to a wider context’ (ibid). Formenti thus terms it ‘engaged or deliberate action’ (Formenti, 2008, pp. 184-186).

In the participatory worldview proposed by Heron and Reason (1997), practical knowledge is the most important kind because it gives rise to social change. Later in my dissertation, I problematize this claim, arguing that the appropriateness of the fourth passage depends on the pact that was established between the participants and those who initiated the research. It also depends on local culture: for example, for me as an Italian researcher, the dimensions of beauty, dreams and imagination seem more important than practical action. Given their power to inform the praxis of living from deep inside the subject and to enhance subjects’ imaging and desiring, I view them as offering just as much potential for personal and social change as deliberate action.

Now that we are a little clearer about the four stages in the spiralling, in the interest of more fully articulating the epistemological bases for my methodological choices, I should say something more about the research paradigms drawn on by Formenti. The epistemological tenets of her methodological approach are informed by: autobiographical research methods, operative epistemology, and co-operative inquiry.

#### **a) Autobiographical elements**

From a constructivist perspective, autobiography may be defined as ‘the “languaged” story of our learning [and] structural coupling with our medium’ (Formenti, 1998, p. 104, my translation). Doing autobiographical work can potentially give rise to structural change ‘as a side effect of the practice of self-narration’ (ibid. p. 105, my translation), because the subject sets off a circular interconnection between the domains of experience and explanation. Questions are asked and answered about life circumstances, environments, emotions, imageries, strategies...

Constructivist approaches to conducting autobiographical research in a group setting require a focus on action as the principal means of researching lived experience and of increasing possibilities of understanding in a participatory manner: and specifically on the actions of writing, reading and conversation.

#### *Writing, Reading, Conversation: cognitive actions in research*

With respect to a training course in the use of autobiographical methods of education, *Graphein*, offered by the Libera Università dell’Autobiografia (LUA) in Anghiari, Italy, Formenti (2008) states that writing about oneself requires positioning oneself within the autobiographical text. This is not a spontaneous act:

Writing is a generative action that *enacts* (Varela) both subjects' knowledge and the subjects themselves. The white paper is a constraint, that frees subjects from "spontaneity", and sometimes leads them to discover, through great effort, authenticity, which is not spontaneous but the outcome of a quest. (Formenti, 2008, p. 179, my translation)

Putting a story into writing is used as a specific technology that is different from oral narration. In the act of choosing the right words, experiences are objectified and put 'out there' (externalised) in a place where they are 'visible'. The implication is that 'to write means to exercise a range of practices through which thinking is (re)structured' (Formenti, 2008, p. 170, my translation): a written text may be re-read, critically re-examined, discussed, or re-elaborated. It creates at least one other viewpoint, making subjects' thinking partly visible to them; von Foerster's principle that 'to know your viewpoint you need to change viewpoint' is relevant here (von Foerster, cited in Formenti, 2009, p. 23, my translation). While at one level, this generates the opportunity to 'reflect' on experience thanks to the creation of a dilated timeframe by introducing writing within the act of thinking, at another level the materiality of the text multiplies our opportunities to enter a more 'reflexive' mode by decentring from ourselves (Hunt, 2013). Texts become 'objects' that their authors can relate to in richer ways, experiencing different standpoints (via cognitive bi- and multi-location). This is not dissimilar to Richardson's method of writing as inquiry (1997), in which critical understanding is fostered by patient and creative immersion in a process of playing with language, searching for words, subverting the logic of linear design, embracing poetic and theatrical forms of writing, following one's intuition about the material, and allowing the material to speak anew through the act of writing.

When autobiographical texts are read and 'voiced' in a group setting, they are re-embodied; something resonates in the reader on hearing his or her own voice because, according to Gadamer, 'reading reawakens something that is visual, which we call intuition. This is the miracle of the *evocative power of language* in itself [...], a vision that has something of that enigmatic presence that suffices to itself' (as quoted in Formenti, 1998, p. 173, my translation, my italics). From a feminist perspective, a similarity may be detected here with Kristeva's notion of the possibility of a 'revolution' or return, particularly within poetic language, from linguistic signification to the pre-verbal functioning of the sensuous. This engenders an imaginative attempt to battle, says Kristeva, within a symbolic frame of reference, for desire, subjectivity, energies and drives to come into play (Smith, 1998).

Reading also produces the con-vocation of the other to the text, through the voice: 'vocalization places the emphasis on the *personal resonances of others*, on the horizontal dimension of the group' (Formenti, 2008, p. 180, my translation, my italics). Writing necessarily takes place at a slower pace and this stabilizes the content of one's thinking.

When both written and oral narration are used, thinking benefits from a rhythmic pattern that alternates stabilization through writing and negotiation through storytelling: a dynamic ‘spiral of successive equilibriums, between definitions [...] and questionings’ (ibid. p. 173), differences that make a difference, and so generate more understanding.

At autobiographical workshops, learners engage in conversations. Generative, open, unpredictable conversations create even more possibilities, while repetitive conversations confirm the same narratives and do not encourage transformation. There are difficult questions here, of course, about the balance between identity and change, and about when the context is risky enough (surprising, creative, heterogeneous) as well as ‘good enough’, in Winnicottian terms, to enable us to experience the anxieties that come with unlearning and transformation at a deep level (West, 1996). Participating in collective learning is challenging: groups can also create closed conversations (West, 2016a).

It should also be stressed that self-narration always takes place in a context of relationships *at multiple levels* (me, us, them, the ‘world’...) and this generates both constraints and possibilities with respect to how we may shape a story and a ‘world’. Consequently, all those implicated in the process share ‘responsibility for that shape’ (Formenti, 2008, p. 175, my translation); but equally, no one has unilateral control over it. This is the level of the ‘we’ or co-evolution, which Maturana refers to as structural coupling. At this level, ‘we may speak of authenticity, when the constitutive characteristic of such coupling is to give/claim voice’, and to ‘open up a space for the existence of another in coexistence with oneself in a particular domain of interaction’ (Formenti, 2006, p. 29, my translation). From a biological perspective, Varela and Maturana have dared to call this kind of participation ‘love’, understood as ‘a stepping stone to interactions that may lead to the operational coherences of social life’ (Maturana and Varela, 1987, pp. 246-247). To generate a loving dialogical space of research and learning is difficult, as a vast literature on the unconscious dynamics in groups warns us (beginning with Wilfred Bion’s 1961 study on work groups and the tacit assumptions underlying on their behaviour: dependency, fight-flight, or pairing). Autobiographical work cannot be separated from the art of living together and the quality of group relations.

The tradition of practicing awareness to care for the self goes far back a long way in Western history, as the Delphic precept ‘know yourself’ reminds us (Foucault, 2001). In constructivist autobiographical practice, the facilitator is called upon to care for the *meso* level, or what Gregory Bateson conceptualizes as ‘mind’ (1979, p. 126).

### *Micro, Meso, Macro*

A ‘mind’ for Bateson is an aggregate of interactive parts with a feedback structure. From his perspective, ‘the individual mind is immanent but not only in the body. It is immanent also in pathways and messages outside the body’ (Bateson, in Keeney, 1983, p. 91). It is a property

of relationships among individual organisms, just as a musician's instrument becomes part of a mental system during the process of performance (ibid). Systems of relationships are hierarchically organized into levels, 'each interdependent on the other [...] individuals, societies, and ecosystems' (Formenti *et al.*, 2014, p. 31). I use the expression 'collective mind'<sup>29</sup> as a metaphor that reminds me to attend to the level of interaction at which subjects appear as parts of a whole, influencing one other in their feeling and thinking, both consciously and unconsciously. In a group setting, it can sometimes be useful to consider the possibility that a subject may be 'voicing' something that is shared by the whole 'group system' in that moment in time. If so, a broader mind would seem to be at work. Even when an individual comment is not taken on board by other participants, or is rejected.

In her introduction to an anthology of papers on the practice of conducting creative autobiographical workshops in adult education, *Attraversare la cura* (2009), Formenti explained that in her experience the collective mind 'tends to evaluate a wider variety of proposals, construct more complex and flexible hypotheses, and negotiate premises that would otherwise remain latent and unchallenged in the mind of the individual' (Formenti, 2009, p. 11, my translation). I am not sure that this is the only possible route, given that in the course of my doctoral research, I have experienced the effectiveness of the writing as inquiry method (Richardson, 1997) in triggering divergent thinking and formulating more inclusive hypotheses.

Whatever method is adopted, it is crucial that wider symbolic and less conscious dimensions be accessed, although 'most of this stuff will remain unconscious' (Formenti, 2014, p. 127) given that we only are able 'to represent a small but complex part' (ibid) of the complexity of our lives. The complexity in question here – i.e., that associated with the different levels of existence (micro, meso and macro)<sup>30</sup> – is a concern in narrative and auto/biographical research; such methods 'offer rich insights into the dynamic interplay of individuals and history, inner and outer worlds, self and other' (Merrill and West, 2009, p. 1). The level of the 'mind' is more difficult to tackle.

The meso-level is often underrepresented in auto/biographical research, where psychology and subjectivity (the micro) or sociology, culture, and history (the macro) tend to dominate the scene. However, in education and learning, our proximal relationships, communities,

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<sup>29</sup> I realise that the concept of 'collective mind' can be problematic. In the context of this thesis, however, I interpret it as a metaphor for speaking about how individuals influence one another in a group that meets to share (or not) stories, activities and conversations. A 'good group' will be generated by empathy, diversity and divergence (Dewey, in West 2016), and I used a co-operative inquiry model in my research because of its potential to facilitate that emergence. Nonetheless, I recognize that there are other ways of thinking about groups. For example, Bion (1961) describes types of group dynamics that do not generate possibilities, but are actual collective minds.

<sup>30</sup> A concise but clear description of these three levels of experience and their interrelations may be found in a book presenting different approaches to autobiographical research, *Embodied Narratives*, edited by L. Formenti, L. West, and M. Horsdal (2014, particularly the introductory chapter).

and enduring contexts, at the meso-level, are remarkably involved in both stabilizing *and* changing our personal myths. (Formenti *et al.*, 2014, p. 39, italics in original)

While I advance no claim to understanding the functioning of groups, in conducting my research, I chose not to ‘throw out the baby with the bathwater’, and strove honestly to attune myself to what was happening in each group, and work with it.

### **b) Operative Epistemology elements**

The operative action of knowing is a key concept both in cultural psychology<sup>31</sup> and in the practice of transformative research developed by Fabbri and Munari, and known as operative epistemology. The aim of this practice is to ‘bring to light strategies of knowledge use, or cognitive moves’ (Fabbri and Munari, 1990, p. 337) and their progressive construction in relation to the individual’s sociocultural context from infancy onwards. Subjects examine their relationship with knowledge with a view to identifying a strategic re-positioning vis-à-vis their system of conceptualizations, which must be satisfying from the cognitive, emotional, moral, aesthetic (related to the pleasure to be derived from a ‘good’ shape),<sup>32</sup> and practical points of view. In its turn, this methodology draws on a set of key notions: *déplacement* (or displacement), metaphors, epistemological observation, and satisfying theory.

#### *Déplacement*

The relationship with knowing is constructed and made visible during ‘doing’ or action. In workshops using this methodology, facilitators prepare specific situations to trigger a *déplacement*: an upsetting of learners’ systems of beliefs and rules leads them to reflect, to change their courses of action and theories, and to become more mindful of their own cognitive-affective styles. *Déplacement* must be sustained by the participant’s desire to know and to engage with the game of knowing.<sup>33</sup> At the same time, it should from the outset ‘include the conditions for creating a context of reflection and cognitive analysis in which the

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<sup>31</sup> Cultural psychology is a critical development of Jean Piaget’s genetic psycho-epistemology, and shares his notion that knowledge and the cognitive structures of the individual are constructed by means of physically acting on objects; however, cultural psychology studies this process in ‘real’ subjects who are deeply embedded in their local, social, economic, political, and cultural environments (Fabbri and Munari, 1990).

<sup>32</sup> The aesthetics of knowing is related to the pleasure and cognitive appeal of knowing: one model is more ‘beautiful’, more ‘pleasurable’ than another; therefore aesthetic choices are immanent to any learning. But seduction is exercised towards others too, through reciprocal identifications, in order to ‘attract others to our [perspective on] reality, to attract them to our frames of reference’ (Fabbri, 1990, p. 51, my translation).

<sup>33</sup> Desires about knowing and self-making appear to evolve over time (Charlot, 1997), hence I have tried to be careful not to take for granted any participant’s positioning within the research process (not even my own).

subject can [...] make sense, self-reflexively, of the change generated in him/her by a *déplacement*' (Fabbri and Formenti, 1991, p. 159, my translation).<sup>34</sup>

I found a suggestive metaphor for *déplacement* in the aesthetic research of Leonora Cupane, who sets out to create a 'path in the wild wood' for the participants in her creative writing workshops (Cupane, 2009, p. 56). Chaos (and the sense of confusion it engenders) is necessary for learning, as Heron too recognizes. Indeed, he attempts to foster chaos through his research methodology, suggesting that it is important to *mindfully* 'stay with it and accept it [...] without trying to clean it up, without getting trapped by fear into premature and restrictive intellectual closure' (1996, p. 148). The process requires 'faith' that 'some new, useful and illuminating bit of order' (ibid) will emerge, but there is no guarantee: 'the whole inquiry may go down the drain' (ibid). This puts me in mind of the need to provide a 'holding' space (Winnicott, 1971), in which participants feel safe to 'get lost'. How do we react/respond to participants' anxieties? As facilitators, how do we encourage the group and individuals to get lost and seek a creative solution in this 'safe' environment? How do we support reflection and reflectivity on experiencing crises and dilemmas in a research/education context?

### *Metaphor*

At LEO (Laboratorio di Epistemologia Operativa) workshops, a group of learners becomes aware, through active experience, of their processes of knowing and relationship with knowing. The specific theme, and knowledge addressed and analysed in their crucial operations are metaphorically represented in actions and objects. Metaphors enable the *déplacement*, the crisis that is needed for learning to happen (Fabbri and Munari, 2005).

### *Epistemological observation*

In order to help the subject decentre from his/her own operations and structures, one or more epistemic observers are assigned the role of monitoring the cognitive processes (moves and crucial operations, metaphors, structures of knowing) activated by the collective mind. For Fabbri and Munari, this is a helpful strategy for tapping into the collective unconscious, which is both 'affective' and cognitive (ibid. p. 147).

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<sup>34</sup> The authors suggest that there may be a difference between the systemic approach and the constructivist approach adopted in cultural psychology: the former sets out to provoke an upset at the level of interactive systems, and the latter at the level of the cognitive system. I believe that this is due to the different levels of description (micro, meso, macro) brought to bear. Taken together, these levels provide us with a rich understanding, although we may only look through one of these lenses at a time.

### *Satisfying theory*

From a cultural psychology perspective, a satisfying theory is ‘a coherent system of conceptualizations, strategies and actions, with which a subject can provide an explanation, from both the cognitive and the moral and practical viewpoints, of the world in which he or she lives and operates’ (Munari, 1993, p. 61, my translation). A new satisfying theory needs to be identified each time a system faces a crisis whereby previous ideas and actions no longer fit with the medium.

### **c) Co-operative inquiry elements**

Co-operative inquiry is described as ‘a way of working with other people who have similar concerns and interests to yourself, in order to: (1) understand your world [...] (2) learn how to act to change things’ (Heron and Reason, 2006, p. 144). Although I am deeply committed to conducting research ‘*with* people rather than *on* people’ (ibid. italics in original), I am slightly sceptical of the straightforward claim that ‘ordinary people are quite capable of developing their own ideas and can work together in a co-operative inquiry group to see if these ideas make sense of their world and work in practice’ (ibid). On the contrary, I perceive cooperative inquiry as a challenging process whose smooth functioning cannot be taken for granted, given that it poses questions of power and ‘expert’ knowledge, and their negotiation, as well as inviting us to reflect on how *we* may embody a democratic vs. authoritarian, and participative vs. individualistic ‘relationship with knowing’, as defined by Charlot (1997, pp. 93-94).

John Heron and Peter Reason list the defining features of co-operative inquiry as follows (Heron and Reason, 2006, p. 145):

- ‘all the active subjects are fully involved as co-researchers in all research decisions’ concerning content and method;
- the inquiry unfolds via repeated cycles of ‘reflection and action’, balanced as appropriate to the group and the topic being explored;
- a ‘radical epistemology’ integrating experiential, presentational, propositional and practical knowing is brought to bear (I return to this point in more detail shortly);
- the practical ‘knowing-how’ dimension is transformative and ‘consummates the other three forms of knowing’ thereby fostering ‘greater flourishing’ and participation in the world;
- there is a participatory worldview according to which the human condition is ‘accessible to a transparent body-mind, that is, one that has open, unbounded awareness’;
- there is a range of special skills suited to this inquiry, such as fine-tuned discrimination (in perceiving, acting, and remembering both of these), bracketing off



and reframing concepts, and emotional competence ('including the ability to manage effectively anxiety stirred up by the inquiry process').

Heron and Reason themselves view these features of their method as ideas that need to be developed into local 'imperfect' practices, and corroborated using 'validity procedures' (Heron and Reason, 2006, p. 150). 'Authentic collaboration' and an 'egalitarian relationship' (ibid) between the initiating researchers and the participants are prerequisite to good cooperative inquiry. Consensus collusion must be challenged by stimulating critical thinking, and anxiety should be attended to by regularly 'surfacing and processing repressed distress' (ibid). Although Heron and Reason's guidelines may be somewhat idealistic with respect to what often happens in practice, I was reassured to find that the authors themselves do not take the naïve view that co-operative inquiry is a given, and speak about resistances and obstacles. Based on my own limited psychoanalytical reading, I would list as additional issues: competition for power, envy, dependency, denial, and feeling threatened by particular forms of cooperation because they turn things on their head.

However, the co-operative inquiry group itself functions as 'a container and a discipline' (ibid) within which these challenges may be met and learning triggered. A dynamic of 'nescience and knowing' (ibid. p. 151) characterizes an inquiry process that may lead to new levels of order and knowledge if the group can tolerate its uncertainty. This makes it a good constructivist practice, because it is all in the making and allows for multiple realities. Co-operative inquiry is a shared practice of 'deuterolearning', Bateson's term for learning to learn (1972, pp. 317-329). Thus, as I understand it, practical know-how (the fourth form of knowledge) emerges from 'a sufficient degree of inter-dependent collaborative reflection and management' (Heron and Reason, 2006, p. 151) or co-ordination, when we become co-researchers exploring our own lives.

Before I move on to the next epistemological grounds for my methodology, the concept of 'radical epistemology' requires an attempt at clarification here. This recent research paradigm is based on 'four forms of knowing [that] necessarily go together' (Heron, 1996, p. 204). In this view, 'we feel, indwell, the presence of a being [...] at the same time as [...] penetrating it imaginally, enacting it through unrestricted perceiving on physical and subtle levels' (ibid. p. 205). Therefore, 'empathic and imaginal' forms nurture and subvert 'linguistic dominance' (ibid), so that words become more radically grounded in feeling.

I found Heron and Reason's participatory worldview to be at odds with certain constructivists' claim that since 'everything said is said by someone' (Maturana and Varela, 1987, p. 27) the world cannot be accessed directly. Linguaging builds another domain, that is different from experiencing, but interacts with the body/perceptive domain. We need to remember that the two domains are engaged in a circular relationship with one another. Heron

advocates using more up-to-date language and grounding it more deeply ‘through empathic and imaginal interpenetration’ (Heron, 1996, p. 205), to bring it into closer communion with lived experience. His ‘postlinguistic’ epistemological stance (Heron, 1992, p. 9) and Maturana’s circular view of language and experience are actually not in contradiction with one another, but provide descriptions from different disciplines. Another possible approach is that of writers and poets, such as Woolf, who wrote of her attempt to put her embodied experiences of shock into words; finding the words gave her great pleasure.

It is or will be a revelation of some order; it is a token of some real thing behind appearances; and I make it real by putting it into words. It is only by putting it into words that I make it whole [...]. Perhaps this is the strongest pleasure known to me. (Woolf, 1985, p. 73)

#### **d) Some methodological dilemmas in the spiral of praxis**

As Heron and Reason recognize, a co-operative group is continuously in the state of becoming co-operative: parity of influence may never be fully achieved. An inquiry is ‘a pluralistic endeavour’ (Reason, 1988, p. 27) in which ‘facilitating roles are of particular importance’, (ibid) both in constructing the method (the inquiry process), and in managing group dynamics and containing the group process. To introduce members to effective approaches to group work and, at an appropriate stage, hand the facilitation over to them is ‘easier said than done’ (ibid. p. 32). From the constructivist and systemic viewpoint that I adopted in my research (Formenti, 1998; Maturana, 1990; Bateson, 1972), I was particularly interested to observe how the interactions among participants and with the facilitators happened and evolved, who took care of whom and what, and who held the space together; in other words, was there circularity of learning and care in co-operative inquiry? How was it maintained? This seemed to be a useful perspective from which to ask questions about consensus, power, anxiety, and creativity. I also needed to challenge the supposed primacy of action over reflexivity, and the authenticity of co-operation and conversation.

#### **West’s approach to auto/biography**

In constructing a methodology for my study, the auto/biographical viewpoint (Merrill and West, 2009; Miller, 2007; Stanley, 1992) became increasingly important to me, and I found myself looking at different interpretations of how to carry out reflective work in order to identify a basis on which to develop my own practice. Auto/biography explores the ‘inter-relationship between the construction of one’s own life through autobiography and the construction of the life of another through biography’ (Miller, 2007, p. 168). Nod Miller proposes examining how the researcher’s social identity and position (gender, age, ethnicity,

social class, sexuality etc.) come to bear on the way in which the research is narrated and made sense of. With the help of field notes and research diaries, the researcher develops a dialogue with different ‘selves’ from the past, present and future and an increasingly auto/biographical (dialogical, permeable, reflexive) orientation towards biographical research, which is never fully attained.

Linden West (Merrill and West, 2009) has written about his use of an auto/biographical method in researching learning lives, which led him to become attentive to his own gendered, social, historical, and cultural stance. Given his psychoanalytic background, he also attends to the affective and unconscious processes that inform the relationship with the other in research, specifically from the perspective of Winnicott’s ‘transitional phenomena’ (Winnicott, 1971), which I explain in more detail in Chapter Nine.

In the course of my study, I became interested in observing how my relationship with knowing came into play in the process of doing the research, both during my facilitation of the workshops, and in the process of writing about it. At the beginning of my journey, auto/biographical writing and interviewing my parents helped me to get in touch with my autobiographical roots in relation to knowing and education, and to connect the personal and the collective in my story (Merrill and West, 2009). This was a crucial step towards grounding my academic endeavour.

I was lucky to have the opportunity to interview Celia Hunt for a publication (in Pasini, 2016), and so to learn about her creative life writing work, which she approaches from what she defines as a bio-psycho-social perspective. Her take on reflexivity prompted me to let go of more intentional ways of thinking about things and embrace a more fluid sensitivity. She draws on psychoanalytic object relation theories and neurologist Antonio Damasio’s studies (2010) on the ‘bodily self’ (or core self) and ‘autobiographical self’ (or extended consciousness) to suggest that:

Reflexivity is a cognitive-emotional mechanism that enables knowledge of the world and of oneself to be acquired through a relaxed kind of intentionality operating intuitively at a low-level of consciousness but giving rise to conscious reflection and action. (Hunt, 2013, p. 67)

Immersion and observation of oneself may be thought of as ‘“giving oneself up” to the experience of “self as other” whilst also retaining a grounding in one’s familiar sense of self’ (Hunt, 2013, p. 66).

I developed an auto/biographical approach to my research by swinging between different levels and using emotions and physically felt sensations (Gendlin, 1978) to become reflexive about my own presence on the research scene as an embodied researcher with a focus on the

co-construction of meaning and of selves during research activity (i.e., learning). My conversations with Linden West were particularly important to me, as they raised difficult questions about my own and others' complex desires, fears, and competitiveness in relation to the research, and how these intertwined in a largely unconscious dance of reciprocal projections and expectations. Challenged by these hard questions, I began to live out the research process with a more open mind, and this more porous disposition helped me to accept that I did not know about much what was going on in the research process, and that this is an intrinsic characteristic of doing rigorous biographical research.

### **Summary**

The founding epistemological framework for my study was a constructivist one, and hence in my subsequent methodological choices I drew on key constructivist concepts such as structural coupling, languaging, the circularity of domains of experience and explanation, and the displacement that generates knowing (Maturana, 1990). In this chapter I have presented the underlying assumptions of biographically oriented co-operative inquiry (Formenti, 2008), in particular the four stages of knowing (experience, representation, understanding, action), which are based on Heron's four kinds of knowledge (1996). I have qualified my use of the term 'authenticity' to describe experience, stating that I take it to mean connected (Formenti, 2009), integrated (Heron, 1992), and participatory (Heron and Reason, 1997). The cognitive actions of writing, reading and conversing in autobiographical research (Formenti, 1998) have been discussed in relation to their respective aims: namely, developing a more reflexive approach, embodying one's story within wider webs of relationship, and caring for reciprocal positioning (Belenky *et al.*, 1986). I have outlined a list of principles drawn from operative epistemology (Fabbri and Munari, 1990) and co-operative inquiry (Heron, 1996), which I used to anchor the designing of my empirical research, while bearing in mind that they might be challenged in the context of practice. In the remainder of the dissertation, I go on to construct an auto/biographical (Merrill and West, 2009) performative text that locates me as a researcher in the world by means of an interpretative act (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011); and at the same time offers a theory about the 'world'.



## *Chapter Two*

### **Our relationship with knowing: a preparatory concept**

#### **Introduction**

This chapter introduces the concept of our ‘relationship with knowing’, which constitutes the key object of this research. Drawing mainly on the thinking of sociologist Bernard Charlot (1997), and on critiques of his work by French scholars in the psychoanalytical tradition, I also incorporate approaches such as those of John Heron (1992) and Belenky and colleagues (1986), which complement theories about knowing by suggesting that how we relate to knowledge may be tied up with the development of the mind and the self.

Although I do not have any sociological or psychoanalytical background, I have engaged with the theoretical frameworks presented here because I believe that they offer valuable additional interpretive tools. These theories are satisfying for me, although I acknowledge that the language is sometimes gendered, especially in Charlot (1997), and I am careful not to overlook this bias. Indeed, I address it by borrowing concepts from *Women’s Ways of Knowing* (Belenky *et al.*, 1986) that raise issues of gender, voice, authority, empathy and inclusion. I explain however that it was difficult for me to integrate a feminist perspective, as the need to do so only emerged as an outcome of the study itself. Possibly Charlot helped me to bring into focus my previously conflicted experience of knowing, whereby I longed for a sense of ‘plenitude’ and viewed experts with mixed feelings (this will become clearer in auto/biographical account provided in the next chapter).

These ideas will combine, in the unfolding of this thesis, with the thinking of Winnicott (1971; 1965) on self and authenticity. An understanding of self in relation to knowing is the final destination of my journey. It is my hope that readers may follow me through the coils of this spiralling, experiencing, imagining, and theorizing, until some sense and form are found.

#### **Charlot’s position within sociology**

When Bernard Charlot wrote a short book gathering a series of elements with which he set out to construct a theory of the human relationship with knowing, he had been refining his ideas in the course of many years’ empirical research in primary and secondary schools. Born in 1944 in Paris, after taking a philosophy degree, Charlot went on to complete a doctorate in philosophy at the University of Paris 10. He held the position of professor at the University of Tunis, and, back in France, at the *École Normale* (the renowned teacher training institution) in Le Mans and the University of Paris 8 Saint-Denis. In this last post, he taught education for sixteen years, founding the ESCOL research team (*Éducation, Socialisation et Collectivités Locales* [Education, Socialization, and Local Communities]) in 1987. The team’s brief was to investigate students’ relationships with school subjects, with a particular focus on clarifying

how *lycée* (high school) students from different social classes, in the suburbs of Paris, acquired knowledge or, vice versa, failed to do so.<sup>35</sup> The issue of academic failure or underperformance was framed by the ESCOL scholars in terms of students' relationships with knowing and school. Bernard Charlot felt the need to provide the group's ongoing research programme with a theoretical grounding, hoping that this would prevent the concept of *rapport au savoir* from 'becoming a catch-all term' (Charlot, 1997, p. 8, my translation).

In the second chapter of *Du Rapport au Savoir*, Charlot clarified his position within the field of sociology, and particularly in relation to theories of social reproduction, as exemplified in a key work by Pierre Bourdieu that explained differences in academic performance in terms of social disparity. Charlot took a critical stance on such sociological perspectives, arguing that they lose sight of the subject, who ends up being subsumed by sociological categorizations. I agree that there may be a risk associated with making simplistic use of Bourdieu's 'social capital' concept (West, Fleming and Finnegan, 2012; Bourdieu, 1988) to establish a direct causal relationship between social origin and socio-cultural handicaps on the one hand and subjective behaviours on the other. Auto/biographically, in my own story and in the stories of my family, I can see the influence of class and context at specific historical times, and yet the epistemological strategies constructed by each person in these stories were somehow original. As Charlot observes in relation to the psycho-social process of appropriation,

The subject appropriates the social under a specific form, including his own position and interests, as well as the norms and the roles that are proposed to or imposed on him/her. The subject is not a *distance* in relation to the social, he is a unique being who appropriates the social under a *specific* form, transmuted into representations, behaviours, aspirations, practices, etc. (Charlot, 1997, p. 47, my translation)

Charlot's insight is that in order to account for individuals who engage with the available cultural models of self-representation, and who are in the process of defining their subjectivity as part of a quest for a more united self (as claimed by another scholar of academic failure, Francois Dubet), sociologists need to theorize a subject with a psyche, who can become reflexive about him or herself as subject (ibid. p. 49).

### **A psychosocial subject who occupies a place in the world**

Taking this critique as his point of departure, Charlot proposed what he termed a 'sociology of the subject' (1997, p. 35, my translation), partly drawing on and partly challenging the

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<sup>35</sup> The sociologist recently reflected on his own learning biography in an interview published in an academic journal in Brazil, where he currently works as a researcher and academic. See Charlot (2010).

psychoanalytic perspective of another prominent research group<sup>36</sup> led by Jacky Beillerot, also engaged in studying the human relationship with knowing. A sociology of the subject ‘can only enter into a dialogue with a psychology that states as a principle that all relationships with the self are the outcome of our relationship with the other’ (ibid. p. 51); therefore, Charlot stood firm in critiquing the views of Nicole Mosconi, a member of Beillerot’s research team, about the primacy of desire as an inner biological drive (Mosconi, 1996). Ironically, he commented, both sociologists and psychoanalysts run the risk of omitting the subject from their scientific explanations:

They [researchers at CREF] propose a subject who is not immediately social and only becomes such by means of the “socialisation of the psyche”, just as sociology posits a psyche that is not immediately that of a subject but only (potentially) becomes one by means of a process of subjectification. (Charlot, 1997, p. 54, my translation)

According to Charlot, and in continuity with the ideas expressed by philosophers and anthropologists such as René Girard (1961), our relationship with self presupposes our relationship with the other, in the form of desire. The question is in fact an anthropological one, if we consider that the human condition is to be born incomplete, in a relationship with the other, desiring, and sharing an inherited world with others through whom this world is also transformed. Charlot draws on Girard, whose work – which began as an analysis on Western literature – ‘is based on the idea that desire is desire of the desire of the other’ (ibid. p. 52), otherwise known as his theory of mimetic desire. The idea, in short, is that we continuously establish triangles consisting of subject-Other-object, whereby we as subjects attempt to imitate an Other that we admire (the model), because they have some ‘thing’ we lack that seems to give them a plenitude that we do not possess. This plenitude is both close and distant, and fascinates the subject, hence it is actually the plenitude perceived in the other that the subject desires the most (Girard, 1961).

Hence, we engage in a game of social identification and self-construction given that only through the other may we become complete and fully human – this is how children grow into adults, for example. This is the characteristic condition of human beings within a shared world of which they themselves are part:

[This desire] is, inextricably, absence of the subject to himself and presence of the subject in the other. Only a quest for himself that is open to the other and onto the world has meaning for the subject. Every relationship with self is a relationship with the other. Every

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<sup>36</sup> Beginning in the late 1980s, the CREF (Centre de Recherche Éducation et Formation) at the University of Paris X-Nanterre, developed a clinical approach that drew on a variety of psychoanalytic theories on the human relationship with knowing, attempting to integrate these with institutional and socio-historical perspectives (Beillerot *et al.*, 1996).



relationship with the other is relationship with self. And this dual relationship – which makes it one – is the relationship between me and the other within a world that we both share, and that transcends our relationship. (ibid. p. 55, my translation)

Given that ‘the world’ transcends the psyche, the subject is from the outset also ‘a body engaged in a world’ in culturally encoded, material, and social forms:

He is also a body engaged in a world in which he must survive, act, produce... The world is there, in an immediate way, the other and the otherness take on “concrete” social forms there. To be born is [...] to enter a world in which we occupy a place (including at the social level) and in which we must necessarily be active. (ibid. p. 60, my translation)

This active participation of the subject in a world that is also social, situates my understanding of the ‘professional self’ by indicating the forms in which subjects relate to what they *do*; and how this leads them to construct a self-image, in relation to others, and perhaps, a sense of place for themselves by virtue of an activity they carry out.

This perspective on the professional dimension is deeply interlocked with a notion of knowing and searching for the self within the bounds of specific social and, I would argue, psychological possibilities.<sup>37</sup>

My reading of Charlot provides me with a framework for my auto/biographical concerns and difficulties with established knowledge or ‘culture’, as well as my feelings of pain and self-dissatisfaction because of not knowing enough and not remembering what I was studying. When he discusses knowing in relation to how we ‘appropriate the world, a part of the world [...] to participate in the construction of a world that has begun before oneself’ (ibid), Charlot speaks to me of a fundamental dimension that makes us human: engaged in both individuation and socialization, and participating in multiple levels of systemic becoming. Using his language, I may begin to think about processes of becoming part of the world, through the appropriation of codes and maps for perceiving, thinking and communicating; and yet also about the expression of unique relationships with knowing, which come into being through embodied action in a shared world.

I have attempted to transfer the French sociologist’s approach to exploring school settings – in relation to how young men and women are educated and how they relate to knowledge – to the study of adults and professionals in education.<sup>38</sup> Charlot suggests that the question of our

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<sup>37</sup> This is where psychoanalysis becomes useful. I find Winnicott particularly relevant, while Charlot relies more on Lacan for his concepts of the dynamics of desire and ‘objet petit a’ (object petit a), as well as the idea that the other is at the heart of self-structure from the mirror stage, in which the relationship with self is the relationship with the self as other (Charlot, 1997, p. 51).

<sup>38</sup> My colleague Bainbridge has recently studied the link between professional selves in education and past school experiences from a psychoanalytic perspective (Bainbridge, 2015). My own interest on the other hand was in developing a broader understanding of ‘learning biographies’ (broader vis-à-vis Pierre Dominicé’s ‘education

relationship with knowing is tied up with key, and potentially troubling, aspects of sense-making, engagement or disengagement with the ‘cultural’, and self-presentation in public space. I find no reason to suppose that adults should be any different to young people and students in this regard. Hence, I expect that adults’ relationship with knowing in formal settings (for example, in research- or work-related settings) will not be separate from other life contexts, but will be intertwined with personal and biographical dimensions.

### **Figures of knowing and the worlds we inhabit**

According to Charlot, it is possible to think of learning or knowing, interchangeably, in the form of different figures of the epistemic relationship with the world that is established through the activity of knowing: acquisition of knowledge-objects (by a subject of Reason), mastering an activity (subject as body), and learning to be in a relationship with others (subject as affective and relational) (ibid. pp. 80-84). As I understand it, these figures of knowing cannot be distinguished from one another without at the same time being composed into a single knowing and living subject, who is a cognitive, embodied, affective, active, relational, and imaginative subject, as philosopher Maxime Greene (1995) would add. This understanding leads Charlot to recognize that the concept of *savoir*, or our peculiar way of relating to an abstract and intelligible world of ideas, is just one of many dimensions making us up as subjects. Some knowing may become reflexive through language, while other types of knowing will require the use of other forms (for example perception, gesture, or empathy) in order to be constructed and communicated. Other dimensions of the interplay between subject and knowledge were brought to the fore by scholars such as Marx, Freud, Foucault and so on.

Charlot’s ideas help to compose the social and the psychological in thinking about an epistemic subject, who engages in an activity (profession, practice, art) through which something is negotiated in relation to self, other and the world.

These three interrelated levels are the cornerstones of Charlot’s definition of his key notion, the *rapport au savoir*:

The *rapport au savoir* is the relationship with the world, the other and self of a subject who is faced with the need to learn;

The *rapport au savoir* is the entire (organised) set of relationships that a subject entertains with all that falls under “learning” and knowing;

Or, in a more “intuitive” form: the *rapport au savoir* is the entire set of relationships that a subject entertains with an object, an item of thought content, an activity, an interpersonal relationship, a place, a person, a situation, an occasion, an obligation, etc., that is linked in

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biographies’, 2000), especially in relation to changing metaphors of knowledge, relationships with mentors, and performativity.

some way to learning and to knowing – similarly, it is also the relationship with language, the relationship with time, the relationship with action in the world and on the world, the relationship with others, and the relationship with oneself as more or less capable of learning a given thing, in a given situation. (ibid. p. 93, my translation)

In our social imagery, knowing or *savoir* is a seductive, simple pleasure, and somehow a forbidden one, given that it draws us closer to the divine (as in the Biblical story of the apple and the snake).<sup>39</sup> Yet Bateson's notion of learning to learn (i.e., learning about the context in which learning occurs, Bateson, 1972), and Mezirow's (1991) meaning perspectives have warned us that the *savoir* is always embedded in deeply rooted systems of values, rules, beliefs, imaginations and emotions that make our relationship with it complex and difficult to change.<sup>40</sup>

It will help the reader to reconsider what sorts of 'world' we can think of when evaluating questions of knowing in Charlot's terms, and how this implies identity. It regards who we want to be and to become in this world (ibid, p. 85), as this translates into symbolic significations, activities, and affectivities that unfold over biographical time.

The world is given to man through that which he perceives, imagines, and thinks of it, through that which he desires, and that which he feels: the world offers itself to him as a set of significations, shared with other humans. Man only has a world because he accesses the universe of significations, the "symbolic", and it is inside of this symbolic universe that the relationships between the subject and others, the subject and himself, develop. Likewise, the relationship with knowing, a form of relationship with the world, is a relationship with symbolic systems, especially language.

But, for all that, let us not forget that the subject and the world are distinct. Man has a body, he is dynamism, energy to be expended and replenished; the world has a materiality, it pre-exists the subject and will remain after him. To appropriate the world also means to take possession of it materially, to model it, to transform it. The world is not just a set of significations, it is also a horizon of activities. [...]

And lastly, the relationship with knowing is a relationship with time. Appropriating the world, constructing the self, becoming part of a web of relationships with others – "learning" – take time and are never fully attained. [...] This time is not homogeneous, it is punctuated by significant "moments", by occasions, by ruptures; it is the time of the human adventure, that of the species, that of the individual. (ibid. p. 90, my translation)

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<sup>39</sup> Note that the word '*savoir*', similarly to the Italian '*sapere*', bears an association with taste: 'For the Latin peoples, *savoir* is to enjoy flavour [*saveur*], to enjoy a good taste, which will become in a figurative sense to be wise [*sage*] and judicious' (Beillerot, 1996b, p. 121, italics in original).

<sup>40</sup> According to Beillerot, the psychoanalytical setting may be conceptualized as a reflexive game of knowing and unknowing: 'Psychoanalysis appears to provide a wholly unique context in which knowledge may be challenged, or the subject may be challenged by his own relationship with knowledge (Beillerot, 1996a, p. 73, my translation).

And finally, in the social world, the question of our relationship with knowing is tied up, although not deterministically, with what Charlot termed ‘knowledge relations’ [*rappports de savoir*] (ibid. p. 98, my translation), in reference to the differential knowledge-power status of different professions and positions in society (as Bourdieu rightly pointed out); a dynamic that also occurs in relation to gender.

Although I situate my study against the background of a sociological understanding of our relationship with knowing, by which I mean a viewpoint that allows for the social and relational dimensions of knowledge, I am ultimately more interested in exploring the affective, imaginative and cognitive dimensions of self-construction processes as these play out within ‘good enough’ spaces (Winnicott, 1971) of research and formation. I will thus go on to take what Charlot has to offer in this sense, before later moving towards psychoanalytical perspectives.

### **The self-construction of a subject of desire**

Charlot claims that any kind of knowledge will make sense to subjects if it is significantly related to their individual stories, and imbued with desire linked to the possibilities or inhibitions it implies for their self-construction in relation to significant others, and with respect to how they imagine themselves in the world:

Learning makes sense with reference to the history of the subject, his expectations, his points of reference, his conception of life, his relationships with others, the image he holds of himself and that which he wishes to offer to others.

Every relationship with knowing is also the relationship with oneself: in “learning”, whatever the figure under which it presents itself, the construction of self and its reflexive echo, the image of self, are always at stake. (Charlot, 1997, p. 85, my translation)

Charlot observes that different philosophical traditions converge on the idea that the human being desires the other in complex forms (love and hate, or jealousy, or envy), because the other represents ‘the human’ and, as such, evokes the subject’s mystery to him or herself: the mystery of what one is and is not. My own experience in relation to knowing, as a researcher and as a learner, is that desiring self and the other can be painful.

It is man’s condition to be absent to himself. He carries this absence inside himself, as desire. A desire that is always, ultimately, desire of himself, of that being that he lacks, a desire that cannot be fulfilled as its fulfilment would annihilate man as man.<sup>41</sup>

But it is also man’s condition to be present outside of himself.

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<sup>41</sup> In fact, this other, when we do not reduce him to the figure of otherness, is plural: the infant is born among other men – and is born of a woman and a man, a situation that he will have to deal with in the Oedipal triangle [Charlot adds].

He is present in that other who, in highly concrete terms, enables him to survive, and who is also a man.<sup>42</sup> That other, because he is the figure of the human, is an object of desire, in complex ways.<sup>43</sup> (ibid. p. 59, my translation)

Charlot draws on psychoanalytical theories to suggest that in the relationship with knowing of a desiring subject, some ‘objects’ – in the psychoanalytical sense of thought contents – will be experienced as desirable, thus motivating the subject to learn more about them and to relate to them in cognitive, affective, and imaginative ways (Charlot, 1997, p. 95). We attribute value to knowledge as a function of the relationships which a particular form of knowing ‘supposes and produces’ for us (ibid. p. 74). At an auto/biographical level, I can see this in the context of my experience as an adolescent at school and a student in higher education, when I could not get emotionally involved in learning and, despite performing successfully, did not feel the joy or see the worth of learning. It will become clear from my autobiographical reflections in Chapter Three how I simultaneously ‘performed’ *and* escaped knowing.

The subject, in fact, may equally be defined as a living being engaged in a dynamics of desire – and thus to be studied as a set of articulated processes. The subject is polarized, he invests in a world that is for him a space of significations and values: he likes, does not like, detests, searches, escapes. (ibid. p. 95, my translation)

The CREF team (1989, 1996, 2000) wrote extensively about desire in relation to knowing and arguing for a primarily psychoanalytical perspective on the notion of ‘*rapport au savoir*’ (Beillerot, 1996a, p. 73).<sup>44</sup> Drawing on object relation theories, Jacky Beillerot (1996a) explained that the desire to know is the outcome of the substitution of an unattainable primary pre-oedipal pleasure with a socially constructed and acceptable one:

We must insist on the fact that desire is a hallucinatory process; the quest for an early experience that may never be recovered again forces the subject to seek recreation through hallucination. It follows that the only possible satisfaction is derived from substitute activities and hence from their objects. Thus, the desire to know may be said to consist of making do with knowledge in the place of a person: A phenomenon that points up the deep connection between learning and frustration; many inhibitions and impossibilities to learn

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<sup>42</sup> Normally, the other is a woman in the early stages.

<sup>43</sup> This desire is desire of the other. It is also, in a Hegelian perspective, desire of being recognized by the other as a subject (and desired by him or her). Finally, from a Girardian perspective it is desire of the desire of the other: because the other is desire, we may only seize hold of the being of the other by seizing hold of his desire [this note is by Charlot].

<sup>44</sup> We should note in passing that, while mainly viewing the desire to know as a ‘drive’ (*pulsion de savoir*) and claiming the primacy of desire over the object per se (Beillerot, 1996a, p. 69), Jacky Beillerot concedes that ‘clearly social belonging does not “follow” mental production, which develops within a social being-there that preexists it; however each individual subject also contributes to the social development of a part of his own freedom [to desire to know]’ (ibid. p. 73, my translation).

originate in an inadequately constructed tolerance for frustration. (Beillerot, 1996a, p. 67, my translation)

However, Beillerot warns us that the interplay between the conscious and the unconscious is constitutive of the relationship with knowing, and that choosing and constructing given objects of thought as objects of the desire to know is a possibility and not a given.

Object relations, the relationship with primary objects, the relationship with all material and symbolic objects are essential to the development of the subject. When the object is knowing, the desire to know comes into play but is in itself insufficient for knowing to become an object; the desire to know can remain evanescent, floating in some sense. Organization of the capacity to enter into a relationship with, and make an object of reality, that is, to phantasize and then to imagine the potential grasping of it, is required. [...] How does the desire to know select this or that object of knowing? The kinds of relationship the subject entertains with the *selecting* of his objects – defensive, jubilatory, explicit, occult, submissive, etc. – remain open questions. (ibid. p. 71, my translation, italics in original)

I do not take a stance here on the debate as to whether desire is from the outset a ‘desire of’ (Charlot, 1997, p. 53). Charlot’s complex forms of desire for self and the other through knowing, resonate with Beillerot’s issue of the selection of different forms of knowing depending on whether subjects find themselves in supportive or persecutory environments, an aspect that we shall address later with the help of Winnicott (1971). While I do not agree with Beillerot’s vision of education as socialization of the psyche,<sup>45</sup> I find it intriguing to look at how socialization takes place through different forms of knowing which are associated with different contexts of knowing and different ‘group minds’:

If education may be defined as the socialization of the psyche and if the *rappport au savoir* may be seen as the process of producing knowledge in order to think and act, starting from learnt forms of knowing [*savoirs*] and as permitted by one’s psychosocial history authorized, then, studies of *rappport au savoir* will involve seeking to understand the ways in which subjects move from knowing/not knowing about their desire of the other, to socialization via forms of knowing. (Beillerot, 1996c, p. 151, my translation)

In my view, this is an interesting way to describe how a sense of collective mind emerges in a co-operative group (Heron, 1996), i.e. through learning as a group to make use of, and to ‘appropriate’ – to use a term of Charlot’s – certain ways of knowing. Co-operative inquiry is in itself a research methodology that problematizes the socialization of, and socialization

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<sup>45</sup> By education in this dissertation I mean a process in which self and other, ‘inner’ and ‘outer’ are in a relationship with one another: ‘Education is not subjectification of a being that was not a subject: the subject is always already there. Education is not socialisation of a being that was not already social: the world, and society with it, are always already there’ (Charlot, 1997, p. 61, my translation).

through, forms of knowing, as well as the principle of authoritative or ‘expert’ knowledge and related desires. When socialization takes place via specific forms of knowing, and more and less conscious processes, this contributes to the emergence of a sense of ‘us’.

Concerning my own ways of relating to knowing, a learning process occurred during my research, which I might describe as a shift away from a static story of keeping away from ‘knowledge’ while desperately desiring to know and be recognized, towards gradually and tentatively sharing with others my mixed desire to know. Inner and outer conversations about knowing and self, with ‘real’ and ‘virtual’ interlocutors (Charlot, 1997, p. 85, my translation), became more gentle and more open for me.

### **Types of knowledge and women’s ways of knowing**

To complement the thinking of Bernard Charlot, I have picked out two other perspectives stemming from educational research on adult learning. John Heron’s views on the four kinds of knowledge that human beings generally operate through, and can integrate into a more holistic approach to building knowledge and expressing creative action, provide a valuable alternative perspective on what Charlot referred to as the figures of learning. Others before me in academia have drawn on Heron’s model to ‘demystify [...] the passage of “felt” or “intuitive” knowledge into professional practice’ (Cheryl Hunt, 2006, p. 328). Heron offers a language for thinking about the specificity of, and interplay between, sensing body and rational mind, conscious and unconscious, experience and representation, as well as the place of the aesthetic languages and dialogue in the process of meaning making. More specifically, he posits four interwoven ‘primary modes’ of psychological reality (Heron, 1992, p. 14) that sustain four kinds of knowledge: affective, imaginal, conceptual, and practical.

A multi-dimensional account of knowledge [...] rests on systemic logic, which holds that intellectual or propositional knowledge [...] is interdependent with [...] practical knowledge, that is evident in knowing how to exercise a skill; presentational knowledge, evident in intuitive grasp of the significance of imaginal patterns as experienced in graphic, plastic, moving, musical and verbal art-forms; and experiential knowledge, evident only in actually meeting and feeling the presence of some energy, entity, person, place, process or thing. (Heron, 1996, p. 33)

A fundamental polarity between an individuating and a participatory function, within the psyche and within each psychological mode, allows human beings to experience both individual distinctiveness and unitive, systemic interaction with an entire field of being (Heron, 1992). Personhood is, according to Heron, the capacity to feel both distinct and part of the whole, so that ‘*the person is progressively actualized, through different states, some of which can run concurrently*’ (ibid, p. 36, my italics). This progression towards living more

fully and mindfully requires making conscious use of the four kinds of knowledge. These are interdependent and may be thought of as forming, during our waking life, circuits or ‘spirals’ from which action emerges as their consummation and fulfilment. This connection between self-actualization and the integration of body and thinking, aesthetic and logical perspectives became important to my thinking as I began to reflect on what knowing means.

I suggest that these kinds of knowing are a systemic whole [...] the circuit can further be seen as a spiral, which expands if our knowing is free and unfettered, or contracts if our knowing is psychologically and socially damaged, especially in early life. (Heron, 1996, p. 52)

He defines ‘congruent knowing’ (ibid. p. 55) as the use of all the different kinds of cognition in ‘emancipated social practice [that] emerges as the fulfilment of human flourishing’ (ibid).<sup>46</sup> Another issue to be addressed is gender. Belenky and colleagues’ 1986 seminal work on *Women’s Ways of Knowing*, set out to explore ways in which women know, which had previously gone ‘unheard and unimagined’ (Belenky *et al.*, 1986, p. 11), because leading studies on intellectual development, such as that conducted by William Perry, usually generalized from findings obtained with male subjects, thus ‘using male experience to define the human experience’ (ibid. p. 7). Drawing on feminist voices in philosophy and psychology, Belenky and co-researchers interviewed 135 women to identify ‘aspects of intelligence and modes of thought that might be more common and highly developed in women’ (ibid), such as ‘interdependence, intimacy, nurturance, and contextual thought’ (ibid). They found that ‘the development of voice, mind, and self were intricately intertwined’ (ibid. p. 18), and proposed five possible epistemological perspectives that subjects may bring to bear on their developmental processes: silence, received knowledge, subjective knowledge, procedural knowledge (separate or connected knowing), and constructed or integrated knowledge.

... The quest for self and voice plays a central role in transformations in women’s ways of knowing. In a sense, each perspective we have described can be thought of as providing a new, unique training ground in which problems of self and other, inner and outer authority, voice and silence can be worked through. (Belenky *et al.*, pp. 133-134)

Issues of power and authority also underpin the suspicion with which connected knowing – i.e., a contextual, relational way of knowing that is not gender-specific, but ‘may be gender-related’ (ibid. p. 103) – is viewed in the public scientific arena in Western societies. While a separate epistemology is ‘based upon impersonal procedures for establishing truth’ (ibid. p.

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<sup>46</sup> I reject Heron’s claim about the primacy of the practical mode of knowing, on the grounds that I attribute an equally transformative, as well as political, value to the affective, imaginal and cognitive modes. The spiralling process is the aspect of Heron’s model that I am most interested in.



102), a connected one ‘involves intimacy and equality between self and object’ (p. 100), which means that ‘the focus is not on how They want you to think [...] but on how they [...] think; and the purpose is not justification but connection’ (ibid. p. 101). The most liberating way of knowing is to integrate all the different perspectives on it, in both the private and public spheres of life, as no one perspective is sufficient by itself. For constructivist women (and men) it is possible to ‘move beyond systems’ (ibid. p. 140) and ‘make connections that help tie together pockets of knowledge. There is a new excitement about learning and the power of the mind’ (ibid).

But integrating different voices can generate frustration and anger ‘in our society, which values the words of male authority [and abstract reason]’ (ibid. p. 146) that can make other approaches feel silenced.

It took me a long time to recognize that this text spoke to my experience of experts and of being an inadequate learner. Gender was not initially among my specific research interests, but emerged as a discovery during my analysis of the research material, and auto/biographically through the reflexive work on myself. Gender-related difference is present in my study, in my relationship with Francesco, and in my choice of the participant biographies to focus on from each of the two groups, one male and one female. And yet I resisted acknowledging this lens. Yes, Belenky and colleagues’ work offered a vocabulary for speaking about making space for one’s own and other’s viewpoints and lived worlds, and highlighted the possible exclusion of intuitive, feeling, embodied routes to knowing. It cast light (or doubt) onto what Charlot termed the dialogue with one’s inner phantom, inner otherness, and internal audience (Charlot, 1997, p. 85). But I found it limiting. For me the five epistemological positions seemed to coexist: I would tip towards one or the other within specific relationships, time periods, or institutional contexts, etc. However, the model allows for ambivalence and struggle in situated lives. Its aim is to provide some level of coherence to help a researcher work with the messiness of experience (Alhadeff-Jones, 2016). Most significantly for my enquiry though, it fundamentally challenged how I was interpreting my own move away from a pattern of idealizing experts and abstract thinking towards a more interdependent approach.

I have arguably found it difficult to authorise myself, from within the cultural assumptions (in my life, family, education, work, society) that I embodied, to speak about gender and knowing. The fact that my doctoral dissertation could expose me to disconnected procedures of ‘accusation’ and ‘defence’ felt discouraging for ‘the germ of an idea [that] is just beginning to develop’ (Belenky and Stanton, 2000). Perhaps, I am not yet fully ready to speak about power and gender in the public space, given that I have only recently begun to nurture my voice, with great care, in relation to knowing and to others. And yet, the fact that I have started to reflexively engage with these themes is a hopeful sign.

## Summary

A subject relates to self, to the other and to the world through the activity of knowing, which can take various forms that are simultaneously fully cognitive, *and* embodied, *and* affective: three crucial and interrelated dimensions in our relationship with knowing. This process of knowing and appropriation/imagination of the world, invariably engages subjects in a process of becoming human, that is to say, of constructing self-structures based on their experience of living in a world of relationships and meaning (Charlot, 1997). Subjects relate imaginatively to their professional activity, in relation to which they actively construct a sense of self in the world. The other is always an object of desire that takes complex forms (Girard, 1961). The desire to know may be thought of as the desire to be recognized by the other, and according to Girard, the desire to become more complete as a human person (an illusion?) by desiring that which others desire and own, and which seems to give them plenitude. Desiring triggers love and hate, imitation and differentiation, and contributes to shaping a social imagination of the reciprocal position of subjects and knowledge, constructing knowledge as power (knowledge relations).

There are other complementary views about knowing. Heron's model of self-actualization (1992) and Belenky and colleagues' scheme of cognitive development (1986) share the idea that by integrating different ways of knowing (practical, affective, aesthetic, and intellectual) the relationship between self and other may be transformed. The former author describes a systemic flourishing of the subject who has the potential to feel both unique and part of a whole; the latter a process of progressive negotiation of the authority to know, leading to the imaginative capacity to connect pockets of knowledge. These are inclusive perspectives. The struggle is one of reconnecting body and thinking, and engaging intimately with an object, as opposed to reasoning in a detached way, or desiring what makes another shine.

The relationship with 'culture' or all of the human that is outside of me – in Charlot's (1997) terms –, as humanness and Otherness, is possibly linked to identifications with desirable others, experts, and promises of plenitude. Other ways of knowing are welcomed in this study as a means of pointing up aspects of the quest for self which often go unattended, and in which the richness of the integrated body-mind and responsiveness to self and other are key.



## *Chapter Three*

### **Autobiographical roots of knowing**

#### **Introduction**

In keeping with the norms and praxis of an auto/biographical approach (Merrill and West, 2009; West, 1996), the present chapter positions the researcher within the research. Given that my research question concerned the human relationship with knowing, I felt the need to investigate the biographical roots – in addition to the epistemological ones – of my own way of knowing, learning and researching. I also chose to explore my primary learning context – my own family – which, while not the only influence to be acknowledged, shaped my relationship with knowing in key ways, tacitly weaving together dimensions of knowing, loving and positioning in the world. I expected that by interviewing my family members I would obtain clues about the sociological imagination that originally informed how I relate to knowing myself, the other and the world (Charlot, 1997) – and about the strategies that underpinned my own mode of ‘playing’ (Winnicott, 1971) with knowing at its roots.

I set here out to show here, through the analysis of my parents’ stories and my own, how a certain kind of relationship with knowing may become a sort of family game, in which each member has his or her own role to play: the protester, the intellectual, the silenced. My exercise in autobiographical research also points up a link between the personal and the collective. It is the story of a woman, with a certain kind of education, whose parents had different ways of knowing, leading them to base their relationship as a couple on an ideal of complementarity that would remain challenging. It is not ‘just’ my story. It might be relevant to others too.

I began to value and give shape to my auto/biographical imagination in April 2014, when I invited my father, my mother and my grandmother on my mother’s side to individually participate in an in-depth auto/biographical interview that began with an open-ended question: ‘Please tell me about your learning life history’<sup>47</sup> [*Raccontami un po’ della tua storia di formazione*, in Italian] (Merrill and West, 2009, p. 119). I did not know at the time whether I would use the interview data as qualitative research material, but I felt the urge to dip deeper into my family’s learning histories to gain a better understanding of what was at stake in them: personal, professional, generational, and gendered stories, and sociocultural

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<sup>47</sup> After explaining the nature of the research and the purpose and use of the interview, I followed the guidelines provided by Linden West (Merrill and West 2009, p.121) about how to conduct an open-ended, in-depth interview with the intention of bringing to bear a ‘serious listening’ approach (ibid. p. 122). I wished to ask my interviewees about their formal schooling, learning in their own families of origin, changes in their relationship with knowing during their adult lives, and their choice of metaphor for knowing. Other questions emerged during the interviews themselves: these explored my parents’ relationship with me as daughter and knower in ways that made the ‘*interview*’ (ibid. p. 114) a strongly dialogical and transitional space in the terms proposed by West. Pierre Dominicé’s work on educational biographies has a similar focus (Dominicé, 2000).

and historical frameworks or ‘discourses through which selves and bodies may be shaped’ (ibid. p. 11).

The auto/biographical interviews later proved to have been a key step – in the research and in my becoming – because they allowed me to create a space (an ad hoc setting) in which to ask my family members about their – and indirectly my own – relationship with knowing: their assumptions and values, desires and emotions. I availed of the opportunity to put questions to them that in 2014 were still difficult for me to ask, but which shed light on my personal reasons for engaging in my doctoral project. Turning to my biography opened a way for me towards a deeper understanding of my research object. The creation of a (new) external space cleared ‘inner space’ in which to focus on my own struggles. I provide an account of the interviews in the first part of this chapter.

In September 2014, in preparation for the narrative research workshops on learning biographies and professional stories that were due to start in January, I produced a lively though confused piece of writing, based on these interviews and the reflections they had elicited in me. Its title was *Mon rapport au savoir. A learning biography*.<sup>48</sup> There are two voices in the text: while one tells the story, the other anxiously intervenes, speaking directly to the reader to communicate my difficulty in telling the story, in the style of a *captatio benevolentiae*.<sup>49</sup>

Oh this is not really working, is it? I’m still unclear about what this text should look like. I can’t envision it. Can you, reader? And at the same time, I cannot accept not knowing what I am doing. ... How are you feeling, reader? ... I have the constant feeling that I am not writing the most important things. You won’t understand. The call of knowing makes me excited and impatient, as well as anxious and stiff. Knowing that you are getting to know me, reader, makes me happy and hopeful that you will like me as I am.

Del Negro, autobiographical writing, 27/09/2014.

I analysed the text at a much later time to its writing, examining it from the perspective of the researcher, in search of clues to my relationship with knowing. This exercise produced the second part of this chapter, in which I offer an interpretation of my own story of knowing, suggesting that it has been based on a dynamic of ‘hiding and performing’. Much further on, in Chapter Ten, I resume this journey, again taking up an autobiographical register again to

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<sup>48</sup> *Mon rapport au savoir. A learning biography* was shared with my supervisor at the time of writing, but then put aside until I went back to it with the purpose of composing this chapter.

<sup>49</sup> *Captatio benevolentiae* (the Latin for ‘reaching after goodwill’) is a rhetorical technique aimed at winning the goodwill of an audience at the beginning of a speech. At this point in my dissertation, I again appeal to my readers, asking them to trust that the complexities of my relationship with knowing, which are condensed in the extract, will become clearer as the chapter unfolds.

tease out my understanding of the process that in the course of my doctoral research led me to become less of a ‘good’-hiding researcher, and more of a ‘good-enough’-becoming one.

### **Stories of knowing and tensions in my family**

Referring back to my father’s and mother’s interview transcripts enabled me to sketch a picture of the psychosocial imagination of knowing that surrounded me as I grew up. The quotations that I have selected – those that I share with the reader – speak to me of my own process of becoming, both personally and professionally.<sup>50</sup> They include memories of upbringing, schooling, socializing and working life, bringing to light the entanglement of subjects and contexts in my own, as perhaps in every, story.

My father was born in 1953 in a poor family that, when he was a child, migrated from an underdeveloped region in north-eastern Italy, Friuli Venezia Giulia, to the suburbs of Milan. At home, the family mainly spoke the Friulan dialect, and only had a small number of close friends in the satellite town of Pinzano. The town was undergoing considerable expansion due to migratory flows from the east and south drawn by the economic boom of the 1950s and 1960s. My dad did ‘very well’ at primary school. But in 1963, he was ‘coopted’ by his father, a construction worker who had survived concentration camps in Germany during WW2, and other family members, to help with the building of a new family home. My father was negatively affected by moving to another town, and being transferred to a different school, and a mixed level classroom.

Father: I started primary school<sup>51</sup> in Pinzano ... . Until Year 4 in primary I did very well, maybe I had some gaps in Italian because, as you know, at home we spoke very little Italian and a lot of Friulano. Some issues... but I remember that in maths and science I did very well, let’s say up to Year 4 in primary I did very well. Then in Year 4 you know that Grandpa bought a site and we moved to Mombello where we built the house ... so in the fifth year – which is meant to be the most important of the five years of school – I found myself in Mombello, and found that Year 5 had been put together with Year 1. Can you imagine what this meant? ... I also suffered from the move from Pinzano, where my classmates were all friends that I played with, with whom I had done my last year of nursery too... so there was a certain kind of relationship.

Recorded auto/biographical interview, Milan, 19/04/2014.

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<sup>50</sup> Involving my parents posed ethical dilemmas. Although I explained to them how I would integrate their interviews into my thesis, and asked them to give me their informed consent, clearly, they are not anonymous like the other research participants. I have tried to protect them by selecting from among the more personal material what I thought could be shared with a wider audience.

<sup>51</sup> In Italy, there are four stages of state-coordinated education: *Scuola dell’Infanzia* (a three-year preschool cycle, not compulsory); *Scuola Primaria* (five-year primary cycle); *Scuola Secondaria*, divided into *Scuola Secondaria di Primo Grado* (three-year lower secondary cycle) and *Scuola Secondaria di Secondo Grado* (upper secondary, consisting of a compulsory two-year cycle and a non-compulsory three-year cycle); and *Università*. Education is compulsory for all children between the ages of 6 and 16.

From this time onwards, he began to ‘protest’, or differentiate himself from his family, by disregarding school: the germ, perhaps, of his adoption of the protestor script in later years. After repeating the last year of lower secondary, he decided to go out to work<sup>52</sup> like his older sister.

Father: Then I began lower secondary in Limbiate and I struggled, as every year I had to repeat three subjects ... and in Year 8 I was not even allowed to sit the exams. I failed because I had become very unsettled, well, I had other issues, I think I had other issues... this I understood later. My way of protesting against my family and a number of other things was not putting any effort into my schoolwork. ... I had already decided deep down that I wanted to become at least economically independent. I wanted to go out to work.

Recorded auto/biographical interview, Milan, 19/04/2014.

The family environment was narrow, and my grandmother, a housewife who liked reading popular magazines with photo-stories and a certain amount of news, somehow maintained regular cultural contact with the outer world – but did not encourage her children to study. My father set himself to read at the age of 15. This was the beginning of what I see as his personal quest for a more satisfying relationship with knowing and ‘culture’.

Father: I remember that by the time I was 15 I had only read about three books that were all on the secondary school syllabus. ... When I was about 15-16 and already working in the firm, one day during lunch break I was approached by a Mondadori book salesman,<sup>53</sup> promoting a collection of 50 novels by different authors, the classics, in... 1970 or a little earlier than that. I paid in instalments and bought these 50 novels and read them all... and *from then on I began to read more*. So this was my journey in relation to culture. And then, well, I’ve always paid a lot of attention and been committed to keeping up with what is going on in the world: so, there was TV, friends, politics, the trade union, work.

Recorded auto/biographical interview, Milan, 19/04/2014.

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<sup>52</sup> When lower secondary education was first reformed in 1963 to offer a single curriculum and non-selective entry, only 45% of the population born in 1949 held a lower secondary school diploma. This increased to 61.82% in the group born in 1952, which was the first to benefit from the reform. In 1960, only two adults out of 10 held a secondary school diploma (although schooling had been compulsory up to the age of 14 since 1923) (<http://www.flcgil.it/scuola/la-lunga-storia-dell-obbligo-scolastico.flc>). My father’s sister left school after completing the primary cycle and went out to work at 14 after spending three years at home with her mother.

<sup>53</sup> Arnoldo Mondadori Editore, founded in 1907, is the largest publisher of books and magazines in Italy (<http://www.mondadori.com/Group>).

The encounter with the 1968 protest movement was a significant experience for my father.<sup>54</sup> He held his own in different social groups and was able to learn the rules. But he came back from the military service deeply challenged in his certitudes, and so he made friends with more politically engaged young working class men. In the interview, he said that he learned a lot in life through the people he met. Different people exposed him to different ways of thinking and gave him a sense of being alive (of becoming more integrated with self and the world, perhaps). Travel was important, as he toured Europe, then hitchhiked to Morocco, and finally went twice to India by land, both times with my mother whom he had met through mutual friends in Milan. He describes her as an ‘intellectual’. His relationship with her was stimulating and difficult in relation to knowing as he struggled to keep up with her many cultural interests.

Father: Travelling is an inner *formation*. It is a very intimate aspect of one’s formation, more intimate, more personal, I think. Because it challenges you, you see different realities from yours that make you think, at least I experienced it like this. I always reflected about who I was, where I came from, what environment I came from, what else there was in the world, how life was for others. ... That year I met your mother who was a great intellectual so that also always stimulated me a lot at the mental level... at the level of knowledge... of being curious... that was also a very important time in my life, yes.

Recorded auto/biographical interview, Milan, 19/04/2014.

Born in 1951, my mother was in fact a non-traditional student,<sup>55</sup> the first in her family to study at university level. Like my father’s, hers is also a story of struggle in formal education, although in a different way. In childhood, her relationship with knowing was largely mediated by her relationship with her father, who had migrated to Milan from a small town in the north-western region of Piedmont to work in the city as a postman,<sup>56</sup> and who expected her to do well at school and to ‘be good’.

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<sup>54</sup> The protest movement, which broke out in Italy in 1968, began as a political and deep cultural revolution in the relationship between ordinary Catholics and the institutional Church that translated into the founding of a number of Catholic *Comunità di base* (base communities) and led, through a process of mass participation and alliance with the workers’ movement, to radical social and political change, such as the referendum on divorce and abortion (Verucci, 2002).

<sup>55</sup> I here adopt the criteria proposed by the research team on the European Lifelong Learning Project 2008-10 RAHNLE ‘Access and Retention: Experiences of Non-traditional Learners in HE’, who defined as non-traditional: ‘a new mature student entrant with no previous HE qualification whose participation in HE is constrained by structural factors additional to age. In relation to younger students *this refers to those who are first generation entrants to HE and are constrained by structural factors*’ (<http://www.dsw.edu.pl/fileadmin/www-ranlhe/>, my italics).

<sup>56</sup> My grandmother told me that he had taken the agricultural curriculum at lower secondary school, was curious about a wide variety of topics and read a lot of books, but was a bit introverted. The postal services offered secure employment at the time.



Mother: I think that for me the relationship with the things I could learn or that I wanted to learn when I was a child always came through your Grandpa. It was my father who told me things, showed me things, taught me things, such as for example a leaf, an insect, something he made at home. It was the only way we had of being together. ... Knowing for me was about listening to someone else who told me something, who showed me something. So I was not very independent about discovering things and so on.

Recorded auto/biographical interview, Siena, 23/04/2014.

This comment resonates with my initial relationship with Francesco, whom I saw as holding the answers.<sup>57</sup> During a year-long course for trainers that I had previously attended in Milan, relationships of dependence on an expert other had emerged as playing an important part in my professional story, and yet I was still doing it at the start of my doctorate. I now see that my desire for his expert knowledge, mastery and plenitude was complex, with mixed feelings of admiration and resentment. I was surprised that, similarly to my father, my mother too told me about the discovery of reading for her own pleasure, which happened earlier than for my father, when she was 12. From a feminist perspective, her first independent discovery might be seen as a more imaginative way of knowing that gave her a sense of emancipation.<sup>58</sup>

Mother: When I was 12, someone gave me a book of fairy tales by the Brothers Grimm for Christmas. I read and reread them, it was a great discovery that I made on my own. ... It was my first encounter with independent reading, I don't remember what I had read before that but it must have only been a few [books]. That was a revelation, I got a lot out of [reading] them... and I still like fairy tales now, in the sense of life paths, adventure, discovery of the world, in many senses, in an affective sense... you can make it through difficulties. ... "I did this on my own".

Recorded auto/biographical interview, Siena, 23/04/2014.

While primary school was not exciting (with a traditionally-minded teacher who showed favouritism to the detriment of disadvantaged children), for lower secondary she went to a top school in Milan, the Parini.<sup>59</sup> She met very creative teachers there, who inspired a desire in

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<sup>57</sup> My relationship with Francesco will be thoroughly discussed and analysed in Chapter Ten. For the moment, suffice it to say to me that he represented the 'intellectual' and was the object of mixed desires on my part (Charlot, 1997); although the relationship was open, I often felt silenced.

<sup>58</sup> The fairy-tale nature of my parents' stories of learning became an important key to interpreting my own founding myths, which I come back to later.

<sup>59</sup> Founded as a Royal Gymnasium in 1774, G. Parini included the lower secondary school that my mother entered in 1962 (the year before the reform, see fn. 52), which led on to G. Parini Liceo Classico (upper secondary school offering a classical studies curriculum) divided into two years of *Ginnasio* and three years of *Liceo*. Before the reform, the alternative to academic-track lower secondary school leading to upper secondary was professional training school offering technical, commercial, or agricultural curricula.

her to go on studying. This was something that her own mother, a former tailor and housewife since marriage, did not contemplate as a career opportunity for a woman.<sup>60</sup>

Mother: The [primary school] teacher said I could do it, that I could go to a better school, maybe more difficult but better, in the city centre and that this would open up the opportunity for me to go on studying. While Grandma had in mind that I could go at 16 to work as a secretary in some company and be financially more independent... which did not interest me at all, I wanted to study.

Recorded auto/biographical interview, Siena, 23/04/2014.

Studying gave my mother the satisfaction of being challenged and having to master something for herself alone. Learning how to write was to become important later in her working life when she became a teacher and a journalist: as a professional she thus had the tools and ‘intellectual’ transitional objects required to appropriate the world and feel capable.<sup>61</sup>

Mother: For the first two years of upper secondary school I stayed on at the Parini. It went well but we had to study so hard. I had a teacher of ... Italian, Latin, Greek, and History. ... She had a class of 36, boys and girls, whom she was able to keep quiet. You would not hear a pin drop. But she kept us in a state of dread of bad marks and a very harsh selection process: in two years, I think at least one third of the students that had started with me failed. ... I remember each night at 9pm I had not finished my homework yet. Every day. ... I had a table that Grandpa made for me, green, I would open it and keep my books inside, I would lift up the flap made of green Formica [laughs] and that was my desk. ... They were two backbreaking years. ... But I learned how to write because she [the teacher] worked so hard on this aspect. There was a book of style, a book of grammar, syntax... we worked loads. It was one of the schools that prepared the ruling class.

Recorded auto/biographical interview, Siena, 23/04/2014.

My mother did very well at *Ginnasio*, but having been put off by a ‘crazy’ Maths teacher, she decided not to enter the Liceo Parini and moved to a more modest *liceo* near home that a friend of hers was attending.<sup>62</sup> She told me that she now regrets this choice because it meant

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<sup>60</sup> The last of seven brothers and sisters of poor origins from a mountain village in the north-eastern region of Veneto, after primary school my grandmother learnt tailoring and then ‘came down’ to Milan after WW2 to work as an apprentice tailor. Only her brothers had the opportunity to study at the preparatory school of the Italian finance police, while all the sisters found employment, as a secretary, shopkeeper, porter, housekeeper, etc.

<sup>61</sup> For now, suffice to it say that a transitional object in Winnicott’s (1971) thinking allows the individual to negotiate the relationship between ‘inner’ and ‘outer’ dimensions of the self and construct a sense of self as both separate and connected; I discuss this concept in greater depth in Chapter Nine.

<sup>62</sup> I too was recommended to go to the Parini by my secondary school teachers, so I went to see it one day. It struck me as an austere and traditional institution and I could not see myself there. I instead chose the best upper

that she missed out on the opportunity to take part in the student movement that originated in the Parini and other prestigious secondary schools in Milan in 1967, 1968, and 1969 – and maybe also to socialize her knowledge in a certain social milieu.

Mother: What I regret now is, I now regret very much that I didn't stay on at the Parini. Because I missed out on quite a few opportunities, I missed the opportunity to experience the years of the protest movement. ... Had I stuck in there, I might have got to know other students better, other things... because at that point a series of processes were triggered off, completely new processes to do with the protest movement in those years.

Recorded auto/biographical interview, Siena, 23/04/2014.

At the local oratory, she joined a mixed group of students that was part of the Catholic dissent movement,<sup>63</sup> and read and discussed the Bible as a historical text, among other things. The university gave her the freedom to construct her own curriculum; this was liberating, and learning a specific lexicon represented another step forward in her self-making.

Mother: On the one hand, great happiness. The second thing, when I went to the first class ... in History of Philosophy with Dal Pra, I couldn't understand a thing [laughs]. I was very good at philosophy but at a university philosophy lecture I didn't understand a thing. I didn't understand what they were talking about, I didn't know the words.

Recorded auto/biographical interview, Siena, 23/04/2014.

In 1974, to support herself financially during her university years, my mother began to work as an adult educator on the 150 hours programme.<sup>64</sup> She enjoyed it because the scheme was informed by innovative educational approaches for those years and offered opportunities for continuous professional learning. Perhaps she found this to be self-affirming. She taught adults for the following 20 years of her working life, before becoming an assistant teacher of Italian as a second language at a secondary school. Writing as an independent journalist afforded her the intellectual and economic recognition that she missed in teaching, but she did not seek opportunities to share her knowledge and negotiate her 'self' and voice in an intellectual milieu.

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secondary school offering a languages curriculum in Milan, the Liceo Linguistico A. Manzoni, which I speak more about later.

<sup>63</sup> See fn. 54.

<sup>64</sup> In the 1970s, adult education classes were run in hospitals and schools at different times of the day with the aim of preparing workers and housewives to sit the lower secondary school leaving examination. The '150 hours' project allowed workers to devote 150 paid working hours to their education.

Mother: So, it happened that all these kinds of knowledge that I constructed over the years, books that I read, interests that I had and so on remained closed, you know, isolated. They were not placed in communication with others, shared with others, so there were no connections ...

Recorded auto/biographical interview, Siena, 23/04/2014.

For both my parents, my education was important. My father said in the interview that he thought having a degree would give me a better chance of finding satisfying and secure employment, and of meeting ‘interesting people’.

Father: A graduate does not have a better life than an illiterate person in an absolute sense, but I think that someone who studied and has a degree has many more opportunities in life. ... When you study, you enter an environment, you come across people... maybe some interesting people. Not that there are no interesting people among proletarians and sub-proletarians, there are interesting people at the lowest levels too. But nowadays it is important to “have an extra card to play”.

Recorded auto/biographical interview, Milan, 19/04/2014.

My father says that he always had to adapt to the employment opportunities available to him. He did tough physical work in a cooperative. He also held the position of chairman at the same cooperative for six years, but then resigned because he felt unable to live up to his ideal of being a ‘democratic chairperson’. He later obtained a permanent position as a civil servant by passing a competitive exam. When I asked him what image he associated with knowing, he said:

Father: For me knowledge is about “words”, so either an interaction with a person, or something that I read in a book, yes, I think that’s it. This is the image I associate with your thinking. This is knowing. It doesn’t fall out of the sky.

Recorded auto/biographical interview, Milan, 19/04/2014.

When I asked my mother about an image that she associated with knowing, she said:

Mother: One image I had thought of a year or so ago, when we talked about this once before, is the one of a blanket with holes in it [laughs], do you remember? I was saying that there were always gaps in what I knew, as if knowing, my knowing, my baggage of knowledge was like a blanket that covers some things, but has holes and in some places it doesn’t cover. But I have realized that this is limiting. The blanket blocks, it covers over, it says: this I know, this I don’t know, this I cover, this I don’t cover... it is fixed. I

use it to cover over, so that whatever is underneath stays there, it is not a dynamic image.

Recorded auto/biographical interview, Siena, 23/04/2014.

Was this a strategy for feeling safe and in control of knowledge-objects (Charlot, 1997)? In the interview, I invited my mother to think of a complementary image (following Fabbri and Munari, 2010), and she spoke of a path to which different factors contribute, such as other people, the historical context, and so on.<sup>65</sup> We spoke more about the image of the blanket, and I suggested that a blanket also keeps you warm. This insight of the warm blanket that emerged from our conversation made us happy, because it helped us to see something different inside this metaphor: an already present possibility of a self-healing, creative (a handmade blanket), and sensuous relationship with knowing.

### **Theories of knowing that circulated unseen**

On examining these conversations, I realized the extent to which my parents' relationships with knowing had developed in line with the historical, cultural, economic, and social conditions in which they were personally enmeshed – Charlot's 'knowledge relations', 1997. Knowing motivated them deeply as individuals and persons in society to challenge their life worlds – although with different 'aesthetics' to one another, as their images suggest. Knowing was a route to becoming, yet a perilous one. Desires for plenitude – for those who know, and hold power – went hand in hand with the fear of participating in the world: knowledge is threatening, because your knowing is never good enough, and disconnected procedural knowing rules out the marginal and 'immature' (Belenky and Stanton, 2000; Belenky *et al.*, 1986).

I realized that my parents embodied some kind of fairy-tale opposites in my narrative: my 'observer' father – fascinated and intimidated by higher knowledge (books, higher education and 'culture') – vs. my 'explorer' mother – passionate and eager to know (resentful?) and to get it right. Was I trying to recompose the opposites in myself through my research? Had I felt the need to construct an ecology of knowing that would help me transform my life world beyond my professional expectations? I increasingly learnt to see the nuances in the stories of my parents who, ultimately, appeared much less stereotypical to me and more dynamic in their becoming. The questions they asked set me on the track of exploring my own distance vis-à-vis knowing.

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<sup>65</sup> The Path is one of the metaphor of knowledge cards proposed by Fabbri and Munari (2010) which my mother chose in a later session in spring 2015, as discussed further on in the thesis.

### **‘Hiding and performing’: a family game**

I have come to develop a theory of ‘hiding and performing’ based on analysis of my reflexive text, *Mon rapport au savoir. A learning biography*, which yielded clues as to how I had responded to increasing uncertainties in my environment (both family and school) by performing successfully as student and daughter – by being ‘good’ –, while at the same time my heart remained hidden and nothing seemed to touch me. I have wondered whether this subjective strategy of coping with a difficult situation reproduced the logics that were present in my family, confirming a game of idealizations and fears that we were playing together. I did not risk producing any more conflict on the ‘outside’, and therefore fragmented my ‘inside’ dimension instead, separating the subjective from the objective, and thinking from feeling.

#### **a) A happy childhood**

Family myths describe me as a happy child with a strong sense of initiative, curiosity and independence. I have often heard the story of when I first saw the sea, aged two, and ran in excitement towards it. After stopping me from running into the water a couple of times, they let me go, and when I got into the water and tasted it, I cried... but afterwards I kept on running towards the sea. Back at home, my mother walked me to kindergarten through a quiet, green neighbourhood while telling me stories. My father took me to my Feldenkrais dance class, which I suspect strongly influenced my curiosity about movement and the body for a long time afterwards. I played language games with my mother by changing the lyrics of songs and composing short rhyming poems. I had beautiful picture books that I enjoyed reading. In our modest 1930s flat in Milan I had my own room, although – I realized – not my private ‘space’, as the family wardrobe was in my room and my parents went in and out without any of us ever questioning that arrangement. I grew up as a disciplined child, and later as a serious and studious young woman – what Belenky *et al.* (1986) call the ‘good girl’.<sup>66</sup>

My primary school years were happy and I had a good teacher of Italian, a frank and ironical woman who often taught while sitting informally on her desk. I had good friends and was the leader of a small group of ‘environmentalist’ girls with whom I collected fallen leaves in the school yard. I was made a Scout leader but that experience disappointed me hugely because I had to manage the most boisterous boy in the company, and was forced to be a ‘good girl’ and responsible, just when I was beginning to relax. I never took on leadership roles after that. Observing from a safe position of clever, timid silence and dismissing any idea of taking

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<sup>66</sup> According to some, it is possible that the adolescent female from a middle-class background ‘has frequently been rewarded for her quiet predictability, her competent though perhaps unimaginative work, and her obedience and conformity’ (Belenky *et al.*, 1986, p. 65). Such ‘hidden multiplists’ sometimes come to see their lives as ‘dull and impoverished’ (*ibid*) and focus on cultivating their inner voice.

the initiative as nonsense helped me to keep on keeping on, at the cost of some fragmentation. Then there was a quick change in the story, when everything turned upside down and I got trapped in a plot in which I was obliged to make up an adult identity for myself.

### **b) Learning resilience in my teens**

When I was 10 my parents divorced, and I entered secondary school with 12 classmates from primary. Our class teacher who also taught us Italian, History and Geography was well-qualified and a left-wing ‘intellectual’, but also an extremely ambiguous and manipulative person. We worked hard and I learned to write better and think more critically, but at the same time I experienced high levels of pressure and was quite unhappy. Even a class theatre education project became a dangerous space of fragile equilibrium between working on the self, and working to hide the self from being hurt. I learnt about hiding, smiling, not caring, being OK. ‘Now you see me, now you don’t’. Seeing the three-year cycle out to the end taught me that I could ‘make it’ and that I could stand up to interaction with a controlling adult who was in a position of power over me. But I could not speak back: I had to lie.

Perhaps hiding and being obliging – expressing no need, wish or fragility of my own – was a broader strategy that I had invented to evade the frustration of not being heard, and also to avoid the risk of being rejected by authorizing others. Feminists call this silencing – silencing your voice, your story, your more authentic self (Belenky *et al.*, 1986). If I could only be perfect, I would be loved and would not have to go through any more separations – being picky meant getting left alone. I see echoes of this in my experience of doing research with Francesco,<sup>67</sup> in which I quite often hid my desires and fears in order to save face and tell myself and him that I knew what I was doing, and that we were getting on well together.

### **c) Knowing becomes difficult**

To overcome interlacing struggles at school and at home, I developed strategies of knowing/refusing to know in order to protect my True self (Winnicott, 1965).<sup>68</sup> Looking back, this evokes for me a form of ‘binging/fasting’ – perhaps a sort of bulimic relationship with knowing? –, in that I showed *others* that I was incorporating knowledge, but personally I did not care much about it and it did not nurture me. I could play the game, but avoided putting my heart into it: I did not care about knowing and being included. ‘Now you see me, now you don’t’. To stop others from identifying me with my mother (‘you are like your mother’, my father would say), I inverted her model by 180° and did the opposite of whatever she did as a knower. If she read everything that other people read, I would not read anything at all. Was

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<sup>67</sup> See fn. 57.

<sup>68</sup> I am thinking of the more creative parts of self, which Winnicott (1965) describes as opposite to the more compliant parts. The self is discussed in greater detail in Chapter Nine.

mine just another way of creating a distance between self and other? I became some sort of hidden ‘subjective knower’ (Belenky *et al.*, 1986), with all the answers already in my head, rejecting/hiding from family and external authority figures – ‘culture’ –, while still being compliant and ‘good’. Deep down, the world scared me.

I did very well at school, but became more silent and emotionally distanced from it. I chose the best high school in Milan offering a foreign languages curriculum, where I studied English and German, languages that I liked but made almost no use of outside the classroom.<sup>69</sup> In Year 11, I changed classes in order to replace Latin (which I found tedious) with Social Sciences. I studied until late at night, yet my mother said in the interview that at the time she wondered why I did not seem to have any real interest in it. Developing a ‘performative’ relationship with knowing at school fitted the dominant cultural assumptions: repeating lesson material verbatim was usually praised, with little time and space allowed for creative thinking. The self was not involved; learning was not ‘playful’, but rather boring and bureaucratic. At home I felt stimulated by my mother, but with unpleasant feelings of being expected to know.

I now see that we were following a competitive script, in which she had to know and I had to not know. Her enthusiasm for knowledge made me feel inadequate, small and ignorant in my limited world. ‘Culture’ seemed unattainable in that I should have known already (‘what, you don’t know that? I thought you knew that!’, my mother would say).<sup>70</sup> Yet I saw no way of breaking the spell by finding other ways of knowing for myself. Venturing into new experiences of learning would have required me to risk something of my ‘self’ that I did not feel I had available. I became aware in my twenties during my early years in university that I often did not remember much after my successful performances, and this started to become a secret regret. The regret had to do with this distance from the world that protected me, but also kept me frozen into a state of repetitiveness and a profound sense of isolation.

#### **d) Acknowledging what does not work**

I did not feel that I belonged to either of my high school classes, where students were competitive and had, with few exceptions, little imagination. While I was still at high school, the experience of baby-sitting a little boy over a four-year period gave me the opportunity to rediscover play for mutual satisfaction, and to take care of another from the position of the adult, which was new to me – I have no siblings or cousins. I did my BA in Intercultural Communication and spent six months on an Erasmus programme in Paris. It felt like fresh air and I met an international community of students with sincere academic interests and an open

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<sup>69</sup> See fn. 62.

<sup>70</sup> I should say that we started to talk about my feelings in relation to this dynamic over the years of my doctorate, and our conversations changed deeply in ways that I think make both of us freer now, to know and to not know yet, as well as to unlearn.



mind. I came back to Milano-Bicocca University to do my MA in Human Resources Training and Development. It was my own choice to leave anthropological studies, and to study how adult learning may be supported in organizational settings. Perhaps naïvely, I saw the workplace as a specific life context in which we may become reflexive about our professional activity (and related representations, aspirations, practices; Charlot, 1997). I kept seeking this humanistic view among more mechanistic perspectives from organizational studies that were offered through the MA, which I experienced as removed from the actual complexities in people's lives. The transition from intercultural studies to organizational studies and paid internships in work contexts was an indication to me of the extent to which my theoretical interests were shifting away from my mother's influence and becoming my own.<sup>71</sup> I began to be interested in the way people make sense of experience; this might represent a different relationship with 'culture', perhaps, a bridge between knowledge and lived lives. To walk this bridge, I would need a clear epistemology to sustain truly creative – and not just active – methodologies and engage people in highly conservative and arid workplace settings.

I now see that I was trying to get out of my own boxes, in which I constrained myself out of the good girl's fear of 'open[ing] up a Pandora's box of possibilities' and 'antagoniz[ing] and jeopardiz[ing] her connections to others' (Belenky *et al.*, 1986, p. 65). During an interdepartmental project that I tutored in a pharmaceutical company, I realized that I was frightened by the group and felt unprepared to take lead, yet the vibrancy of cooperatively knowing – a possible route? – excited me. As mentioned in the Introduction, a sabbatical in South East Asia was the first move I made towards unlearning my fixed schemas by subjecting myself to the condition of experiencing *déplacement* (Fabbri and Formenti, 1991) in extremely different social and cultural contexts.<sup>72</sup> The desire to address feelings of 'vagueness' pushed me to go back to Europe and to my education; I half-consciously enrolled on a doctoral programme, where I gradually intuited that I could now begin to be friends with knowledge and culture. Only much later in the research process, did I realize that I was learning other ways of knowing, which neither of my parents had consciously embodied, and integrating 'objective and subjective knowing' (Belenky *et al.*, 1986, p. 134). Stripping bare the myth of ubiquitous knowledge, the research began to turn my world upside down again and anew.

## Summary

In this chapter I have positioned myself in relation to the auto/biographical study presented (Merrill and West, 2009). Interviewing my parents proved to be a crucial step towards making

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<sup>71</sup> My studies in humanities and languages first and in intercultural communication later had seemed to follow the path of my mother in the fairy-tale polarization between my parents, the humanist vs. the scientist.

<sup>72</sup> See *supra* pp. 6-7.

contact with and naming resonances that were challenging for me. Knowing generated tensions in my family: my father and mother's families experienced migration, marginality and limited opportunities for education, with gender bias making conditions even more difficult for the women. My parents embraced the progressive ideas of the 1968 protest movement, struggling in their personal and professional lives to invent more agentic positioning. With greater or less ease they both found a key in 'culture': books, politics, critique, films, and travels. Yet, the desire for plenitude came with fears of being inadequate, fuelled by idealizations of the intellectual and of the merits of cognitive thinking and objective knowing – what my mother called 'covering the holes'. I had a happy childhood and middle-class education, although there were tensions that I responded to by being 'good'. The divorce that occurred put me under great pressure to keep the fragments together. I learnt to hide and 'perform', by which I mean being successful at school, and later at work, while not being emotionally invested. In fact, I enjoyed aesthetic/intellectual experience, but objective knowing scared me – and seemed illogical – like going to war. I cultivated the 'inner expert' (Belenky *et al.*, 1986, p. 68) and put myself inside of a box of self-protection by subverting my mother's tactic: she would know everything, and I would know nothing. 'Now you see me, now you don't'. These strategies left me with a sense of disconnection, and this was at the autobiographical root of my quest.



## ***Chapter Four***

### **Methodology**

#### **Introduction**

In this chapter, I outline the methodology that I proposed to my research participants with the aim of eliciting and ‘holding’ insightful narratives of knowing and related processes of self-making. In the first section, I reconstruct the initial research scene: my original research design, my first steps in the field, and encounters that informed my imagination of the research. At the outset, my imagination was somewhat inhibited and anxious, although I tried to be alert to possibilities of seeing things ‘as if they could be otherwise’ (Greene, 1995, p. 15). I next introduce my fellow facilitator, Francesco, and describe the processes of recruitment that produced the two groups of participants. In the second section of the chapter, I report the final project design, which involved six monthly sessions that were run in parallel in Milan and Canterbury, between January and June 2015, plus a follow-up session about four months later. I summarize the key principles underpinning my methodological approach and changes that I made to this approach as the research unfolded, in keeping with the circular method of enquiry that I had embraced (Formenti, 2008; 1998).

In the third section of the chapter, I present the research programme in detail in order to provide a clear understanding of the activities through which the narratives were generated, which is salient to my second research question, concerning *how* a context of learning and research may be built.<sup>73</sup> The chapter closes with a description of the ‘data set’ thus collected, the ethical procedures followed, and my chosen method of data analysis.

From the present chapter onwards, the written text will be complemented by visual content. This combined format is informed by the hypothesis that enriching verbal text with photographic images has the power to elicit alternative ways of knowing, thereby producing a ‘performance text’ (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011, p. 6) that shows its object rather than just describing it – ‘the text performed what it preached’ (Richardson, 1997, p. 71) – and that uses multiple languages to evoke resonance beyond the enclosures of intellect.

#### **Setting the scene for the research**

##### **a) Diamonds and snakes: the researcher’s imagination**

The initial design of my study comprised: four groups of 8-10 participants, two groups at the University of Milano-Bicocca (Italy) and two at Canterbury Christ Church University (UK), each of which I envisaged as undertaking its own process of biographically oriented co-operative inquiry (Formenti, 2008). One group at each university was to be composed of MA

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<sup>73</sup> See supra p. 4 in the Introduction for the statement of the two research questions.

and PhD/MPhil students, and the other of practicing education professionals. Out of these groups, I planned to form – on a voluntary basis – student-professional pairs to engage in duo-ethnographic dialogue (Norris, Sawyer and Lund, 2012) via email, in order to gather further ‘data’ and emerging theories about the experience of doing co-operative research. I was ready to invite selected participants to an additional narrative interview in order to explore their stories in greater depth.

Looking back and reflecting on this original research design, it seems to me that I was seeking order. Linear thinking linked theory to practice in my imagination, although my reading was very much around systemic thinking and ‘spiralling’ (Formenti, 2008). I am now relieved that the project later became far simpler and yet far more complex, emergent and organic. In hindsight, it appears as though I had been setting myself an impossible task. Auto/biographically, I was feeling vulnerable about proving myself in a foreign academic system, in which I needed to be recognized as competent for the research task ahead.

I remember feeling concerned that students and professionals might find it difficult to engage in research together, having diverse interests and different lexicons. I had not imagined that my project might attract professional academics: neither students nor practicing in the outside world, they were my supervisors and mentors, so I had difficulty in viewing them as co-operative research subjects. Metaphorically speaking, I wanted to research stories on the boundaries between higher education and professional worlds, but I could not yet see that these boundaries were not clear-cut, but rather overlapping and fluid within lived stories of professional practice. I was advised to be more open to things as they were; yet it took some time for me to understand what colleagues meant by saying that I was conducting an ambitious project. Indeed, for several months the word ‘ambitious’ kept slipping my tongue, as though it were unthinkable. Was I an ambitious student, learner, and professional? This act of suppression, of which I was constantly being reminded, eventually awoke my curiosity about my own relationship with this doctoral research and knowing, suggesting that greater auto/biographical awareness was required if I was to fully express my less visible questions around these themes.

For one thing, I found it difficult to embrace uncertainty in research and to trust in the scientific value of a qualitative, small-scale, auto/biographical study. Could such an approach really be ‘scientific’ and ‘expert’ enough? I was still prisoner to the concept of triangulation (in the sense of validating one’s findings by using different methods to access the phenomenon under study), when I came across Laurel Richardson’s image of the reflecting and refracting crystal: ‘there are far more than “three sides” by which to approach the world’ (Richardson, 1997, p. 92). Richardson suggests that research reflects externalities and refracts within itself, ‘casting off in different directions’ (ibid.) interpretations that are dependent upon our situated viewpoint, but at the same time bring to light the process at work and the learning

of the embodied researcher. She proposes a shift in our imagination of ‘truth’ to accommodate multiple narratives, and an affected and storied researcher. It was even more difficult for me later on to trust in the process of writing as inquiry, become more ‘play-full’, and let go of feelings of fear and strategies of control. The learning that resonating with my material in a more open, spiralling way would eventually allow some light to shine through my little diamond had yet to emerge from the research process.

In April 2014, I was off to Milan for a month of fieldwork at the ‘Riccardo Massa’ Department of Human Sciences and Education (Dipartimento di Scienze Umane per la Formazione ‘Riccardo Massa’) of the University of Milano-Bicocca. I had arranged to meet some lecturers and the coordinator of the Master’s Degree in Education (Laurea Magistrale in Scienze Pedagogiche), to ask them informally about the degree course from which I was thinking of recruiting my student participants. Professionals were to be ex-students. It was difficult to identify an equivalent MA programme at Canterbury Christ Church University (from now on CCCU), and my supervisor and I grappled with this issue for some time. I began to look for a senior researcher who could help me to design the workshops which were to provide the key research setting in which to generate stories of knowing. At least I was already fully aware that conducting the co-operative workshops would be challenging. This was an incredibly busy month of researching the research context.

Attending seminars at the graduate school in Bicocca helped me to modify received stereotypical views representing the Italian approach to educational research as more ‘creative’ and ‘philosophical’, and the British approach as more ‘traditional’ and ‘matter of fact’. Various doctoral students and lecturers in CCCU had framed the cultural gap in these terms during informal conversations. I had high expectations before attending a workshop for PhD students in Bicocca on the self of the researcher, but was disappointed to find that the contents were far removed from embodied (experiential, aesthetic, bodily, affective) ways of investigating the self via research experience.<sup>74</sup> Following the literature review and research design phases, I was now living out ethnographic aspects of the research process, which made for a more uncertain pace, as I wrote in a short report for my supervisor:

I now have many notes, drawings, the recordings of my interviews,<sup>75</sup> contacts with professors, and contacts with places where I can get more experience of bodily practices in transformative research. This has been a month of

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<sup>74</sup> I note in passing that, since 2014, the University of Milano-Bicocca in collaboration with the Catholic University of Milan has been running a cycle of qualitative research workshops entitled PQR (Playing with Qualitative Research) with the aim of introducing creative approaches into doctoral training programmes. In CCCU, as a member of the Auto/biography and Narrative Research and Knowledge Exchange Theme Group, I also had the opportunity to encounter creative approaches to research in education.

<sup>75</sup> During this month, I also auto/biographically interviewed family members about their learning biographies, which informed my reflexive process in key ways (see Chapter Three).

researching uncertainty, structuring less, and opening up more. It felt like there was no time to record all this. Maybe this is how research works too, it walks around and meets with the unexpected.

Del Negro, report for supervision, Canterbury, 07/05/2014

More time and a more open mind were required to meet others in the field, and to make sense of what was going on in conversations.

One weekend in April, I joined an intensive co-operative seminar organized by my supervisor Laura Formenti and her work group (doctoral students, education professionals, lecturers) in a beautiful country house near the town of Toirano, in northwestern Italy, among olive-tree terraces overlooking the sea. A series of workshops on narrative and systemic transformative research practices were facilitated by different participants in turn, followed by feedback from the group. The experience of the workshops, along with cooking meals with the other participants and going for meditative walks, provided me with a richly embodied sense of lifewide learning. The body was at the centre of the practices proposed: exploring the outdoors using all five senses, movement and breathing practices, using photographs, creative writing from free drawing. Formenti's compositional 'spiral of praxis' method (2008) was our guiding metaphor in creating favourable conditions for self-formation in this creative setting. After my early months of research spent locked up in the library, I welcomed care as a feature of that context. During my own three-hour workshop entitled *Knowing and becoming: an open rehearsal for a narrative workshop*, I tried out with my colleagues a series of exercises based on movement and creative writing (Cupane, 2009). I received key feedback from them about maintaining rituality as a celebration of beauty, and respecting the order of the epistemological steps in the spiral. When facilitating I was told, it is crucial to attend to how the group is interacting and to facilitate the conversation by asking questions, suggesting connections among ideas, or offering additional points of view. The facilitator also needs to be respectful of difference, and of difficulties – feelings, bodily conditions, and possible conflicting commitments – on the part of participants. I felt reassured that I could provide a safe enough holding space when Formenti and others said that my style of facilitation had felt reliable and calm to them. I took away the learning that it is important to prepare carefully and be flexible, and that beauty should be at the centre of my work starting from the research materials and space, because these elements have the power to foster care for those taking part in the inquiry process and for their stories.

During another workshop, I produced the drawing below in response to the input: ‘The soul is an ocean under the skin’.<sup>76</sup> My picture represents a wave<sup>77</sup> rising from a stormy green and blue sea, with a snake of life swimming in the depths of the water:



Fig.1 Del Negro, the sea-soul, Toirano, 26/04/2014.

In my report, I wrote:

This experience as a whole gave me a lot to think about ... how family and primary relations, love, the seminar itself, and academic research are all part of the same wave ... growing beneath me, something that is carrying me further on to find more of my own voice in my work and in my life.

Del Negro, report for supervisor, Canterbury, 07/05/2014

At the time, I did not write about the other element in the composition, which was possibly equally vivid, with the potential to propel me just as far onwards on my journey: the snake. A symbol of wisdom and transcendence in C.G. Jung’s Red Book, the snake used to scare me in my childhood dreams. As is well known, in the Hebrew tradition the snake symbolizes both seduction/sexuality and the thirst for knowledge, as narrated in the story of the tree and the forbidden fruit. In this story, the snake also represents a form of knowledge that is frightening

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<sup>76</sup> This sentence is taken from the book C. Guérard (2006) *Piccola filosofia del mare*. Tr. it., Ugo Guanda Editore, Parma 2010.

<sup>77</sup> The wave is one of Ocean ‘metaphor of knowledge’ cards (see Appendix n. 1 and the Introduction), a card that I actually picked during one of my reflexive research sessions, as described in the auto/biographical chapter (infra p. 229).



because it distances man (and woman?) from a life that is fully in contact with itself. In the story of Adam and Eve, Adam learns to be ashamed of his nudity after giving in to the seduction of the snake. Knowledge generates both shame and pride. In my drawing, I see the snake as evoking meaning and depth, and the fear of what cannot be controlled in lived research and life: possibly, a fear of the knowing that distances us from life, which entails responsibility for ‘interpreting’ our lives despite remaining deeply immersed in them. The drawing hung above my bed for some time as a significant representation of the self in research. It reminded me to bring the body into my research through aesthetics and the performative arts, and to speak about the unconscious in stories of becoming. In essence, the snake that had ‘emerged’ unconsciously from this drawing pointed up our need to reconnect with an embodied knowing that is wholly subjective and yet may draw on collective and holistic knowledge present in different cultural traditions.<sup>78</sup>

### **b) Introducing my co-facilitator, Francesco**

At Laura’s invitation, I attended the Open Day of the BA in Education (Laurea Triennale in Scienze dell’Educazione) at the University of Milano-Bicocca, in order to build up a picture of the BA curriculum leading to the MA from which I hoped to recruit participants for my research.<sup>79</sup> On my way to see Formenti, I took the elevator with a man who was shortly after introduced to me as Francesco Cappa, Assistant Professor in Methodology of Education (Metodologia della Formazione) on the bachelor’s degree programme. Laura had advised me to meet him, because he coordinated careers guidance for the BA programme (hence he worked on the boundary between HE and professional worlds) and had specific competence in, and experience of, using performative languages in education, which was of relevance to my study.

Indeed, I was actively seeking competent help in setting up and facilitating the research workshops,<sup>80</sup> which I knew from my MA in Human Resources Training and Development (Formazione e Sviluppo delle Risorse Umane) and from my experience as a tutor to be a highly sophisticated task. Francesco displayed a curiosity for my project that I had not expected, and proved to be a committed research partner. Given that he was working within the Italian research context itself, he could help me with the logistics of setting up the workshops, and from and with him I learnt a lot about the facilitation of groups. During the

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<sup>78</sup> A snake twisted around a stick was the symbol of healing adopted by the Roman god of medicine, Esculapio, who mediated between earth and sky. In the Indian tradition, intertwined Naga snakes represent transcendence, as does the symbol of Greek god Hermes. On the subterranean and unconscious messages borne by intermediary creatures such as snakes, see J.H. Henderson (1964).

<sup>79</sup> The BA programme is designed to train educators, while students who undertake the MA receive training for the roles of education specialist and educational service manager.

<sup>80</sup> I thank Ivano Gamelli, who teaches Pedagogy of the Body (Pedagogia del Corpo) on the BA programme, for generously sharing his creative, art-based and corporeal work with me, and making me think about creative ways of using space and time to produce more embodied stories.

first ESREA Interrogating Transformative Learning network conference in Athens in June 2014, while walking through the grand Greek temples, Francesco and I began to tell each other stories about education, the arts, our family myths and professional lives. On the way back, I invited him to work with me on developing and implementing a cycle of five workshops around themes that I thought could generate ‘good stories’ – i.e., rich in detail, experientially inclusive and reflexive in character (Merrill and West, 2009, p. 113) – in relation to my research questions. He suggested adding an intensive performative theatre weekend to the workshops, with a view to combining our different methodological approaches.

### **c) Recruitment**

In November and December 2014, I set out to form two groups, one in Milano-Bicocca and one in CCCU, with the aim of recruiting 10 participants to each. I was targeting subjects at Levels 7 and 8 in higher education,<sup>81</sup> or recent graduates, in the areas of education and social care, with relevant work experience (and in this sense on the boundary between HE and professional worlds).

The initial recruitment strategy in Bicocca made use of a range of tools that soon began to seem logistically unwieldy and over-complicated. The challenge that I faced was that of recruiting a group of subjects who would be strongly motivated enough to commit to conducting reflexive research on their lives over a period of several months. To this end, I finally opted for a decidedly opportunistic method of sampling (Merrill and West, 2009), by asking Francesco and Laura to help me draw up a list of MA and PhD students and graduates whom they thought might be interested. Formenti, as Head of the Graduate School, sent email invitations to the students, while the professionals were contacted informally. One advantage of this approach was that it allowed me to recruit a group that was heterogeneous in terms of professional work settings, experience, and expertise, which I realized should contribute to providing a richer picture of the issues under study.

On 7 November 2014, some 15 persons attended a presentation of the project in Milano-Bicocca. I was nervous but reassured by the presence of some fellow PhD students who were my friends. Of the 11 people who quickly confirmed their attendance over the following days, none were my friends, while some were ex-students of Francesco’s.

In CCCU, an invitation was circulated through the Graduate School, and a few personal invitations were sent via email by my supervisors to students and ex-students who might be interested. I was helped by the university to develop a more appealing flyer (Appendix n. 2)

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<sup>81</sup> As per the European Qualification Framework (EQF), in which EQF Level 7 corresponds to a Master’s Degree (or Laurea Magistrale, in Italy) and EQF Level 8 corresponds to a PhD (or Dottorato, in Italy). See: [https://ec.europa.eu/ploteus/en/compare?field\\_location\\_selection\\_tid%5B%5D=453&field\\_location\\_selection\\_tid%5B%5D=471](https://ec.europa.eu/ploteus/en/compare?field_location_selection_tid%5B%5D=453&field_location_selection_tid%5B%5D=471).

and advised to slightly modify the wording to speak about ‘a programme of professional and personal development and research’, and the opportunity to ‘benefit from a free series of experiential sessions’ offered to ‘10 people only’ during which it would be possible for participants to enrich the ‘language’ they used in education by drawing upon the arts. I did not then realize that this invitation was likely to attract academics who were critical of the bureaucratization of university education (Barnett, 2011), a difference between the English and Italian settings that became evident later.<sup>82</sup> This recruitment process was more difficult. During the presentation that we held in Canterbury on 3 December 2014, I felt nonetheless safer than I had in Bicocca; the latter environment had become less familiar to me, given that I had now been an ‘expatriate’ for a few years, first as a traveller in the East and more recently as a doctoral student in the UK. This made me more acutely aware that the potential for conducting research is affected by the researcher’s own embeddedness in the setting. It also drew my attention to a form of gentle competition between Francesco and myself, which would later prompt me to reflect on complex desires and dynamics in co-operative research. Finally, my feeling of relative comfort, as a researcher, in a foreign language environment suggested to me that, perhaps, working in another language could have the effect of liberating me from my fears of not being ‘expert’ enough for this task; although I did not realize at that time how deep this transformation might be.

We initially failed to recruit enough participants and so various other faculties were emailed, until finally a group of seven was formed. I was surprised because I thought that participating in the cooperative inquiry was a valuable training opportunity, but I was looking at the project from the perspective of a certain work ethics, according to which the value of training is a function of its monetary worth and perceived career benefits! It took me a long time to realize that my participants were generously volunteering with me, a student, to find out something of mutual interest to us all. This entailed a condition of uncertainty, even more so than in a more traditional context of adult education or *formation*, and I could promise nothing (skills, knowledge, qualifications) apart from my commitment to caring for the space I was offering. Naturally, the propensity to commit to the project also depended on the institutional and relational context, given that in Milan personal invitations had been issued by esteemed figures within the institution; in Canterbury, the personal relationship with participants seemed less direct. The two groups differed in composition, with a higher proportion of academics in Canterbury and of practitioners in Milan:

- eleven people in Bicocca: one MA student, two PhD students, and eight graduates of the MA in Education who were practicing professionals in the education (one primary, one

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<sup>82</sup> See Chapter Seven and particularly *infra* pp. 158-159.

upper secondary school, and one dance teacher), and social care (three educators, one project leader, and one service coordinator) sectors;

- seven people in CCCU: two PhD students (one student and one careers counsellor taking a PhD), three lecturers at CCCU (one at the Faculty of Education, one in the Centre for Career and Personal Development, and one in the School of Nursing), and one art therapist.

While the *dramatis personae* – which I have devised to protect participants’ confidentiality and privacy by using pseudonyms (Merrill and West, 2009) – will be introduced at the opening of each case study, I now offer an overview of the research design.

## Project design

### a) Timing and structure

A series of four full-day workshops, plus one intensive weekend, plus a half-day to wind up and draw conclusions, were run from January to June 2015, with each month’s encounters in the two universities being run a week apart, first in Bicocca and then in CCCU. The rationale was that meeting once a month would enable a good rhythm to be established in the interplay between working and personal life (or experience, in Heron’s view, 1996) and time spent in the co-operative research group, or the reflective cycle – whereby reflections could be brought back to the group and potentially challenged, expanded, or enriched. The timesheet below helps to visualize the overall research process and its components. April 2014 is marked as the starting date of my auto/biographical work – after interviewing my family –, and April 2015 as the date when I initiated my in-depth analysis of it, given that I decided around that time – shortly after the session on mentors – to consider my own experience as a researcher as fully part of my research object.

<i>EMBODIED NARRATIVES WORKSHOP – TIMESHEET 2015</i>								
	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Oct	Nov
Bicocca workshop	16	13	20	10	9-10	6	16	
CCCU workshop		24	21	28	18	16-17	13	24
Auto/biographical work	April 2014	a/b	a/b	Deepening	a/b	a/b	a/b	To end

Fig. 2 Timesheet of the research process.

A full day was thought by Francesco and myself to be a long enough time, within this overall pattern, to accomplish the aesthetic, biographical and critical work required to connect the individual and collective levels at each session. We began with Bicocca, as it seemed a better-

known and less challenging context, in which we did not face the issue of language.<sup>83</sup> In practice, proposing the same research project to two different co-operative groups – by virtue of Bateson’s principle of a difference that generates a difference, in terms of information and knowledge (Bateson, 1979) – challenged us to question the collective process, and how linguistic and contextual constraints can affect structural coupling (Maturana, 1990).

The programme was designed to lead participants through a process that would progress from exploring their relationship with knowing to experiencing their professional selves in action. It was also planned to foster a growing sense of embodiment, by guiding participants to move from a narrative space to one of physical expression in which they could draw on performative languages. Sessions were designed to explore participants’:

- (1) *Roots of knowing*, a metaphor for inviting them to investigate what was at the origin of their relationship with knowing;
- (2) *Learning biography*, meaning their personal story of learning (Dominicé, 2000) or ‘languaged’ story of learning and structural coupling with the medium (Formenti, 1998, p. 104, my translation);
- (3) *Strategies of knowing*, or the operative strategies they deploy to construct and organize knowledge (Fabbri and Munari, 2005), and to use professional knowledge;
- (4) *The mentor*, that is to say, a relationship with a mentoring figure within which complex desires for knowing are played out;
- (5) *The professional self in action*, or the complex relational and corporeal dynamics of interaction in professional practice (weekend);
- (6) *Research conclusions*, or the theories collectively constructed as a co-operative group in answer to the research question.

In October in Bicocca and in November in CCCU, each group met for a half-day follow-up session.

### **b) Formats for generating ‘data’: individual, collective, and auto/biographical**

The expression ‘data collection’ can be misleading, because it conceals the material and interpretive work of representation inevitably required to make the world visible, an argument that I have drawn from the Introduction to Denzin and Lincoln’s (2005) *Collecting and Interpreting Qualitative Material*.

Qualitative research is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. It consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible. These practices

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<sup>83</sup> On the contrary, however, I later realized that conducting sessions through English mitigated an element of imbalance between my ‘expert’ colleague and myself, given that in English we were both obliged to use simpler language.

transform the world. They turn the world into a series of representations, including field notes, interviews, conversations, photographs, recordings, and memos of the self. At this level, qualitative research involves an interpretive [...] approach to the world. (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005, p. 4)

In terms of the materials chosen to represent people's experiences in this study, at the start of the programme, each of the participants was given an individual and personal notebook which, it was explained, would not be accessed by the facilitators, and could be used to note personal thoughts both during and outside of the group sessions. Participants also received an individual folder, in which to build up an individual portfolio containing their original writings and colour photos of the artwork they produced during the research sessions.<sup>84</sup> The contents of these folders were also copied to me as part of the data 'collected' for the purposes of this study. After each session, one participant who volunteered – a different participant each time – wrote a report of the session, which was first sent via email to the facilitators, and then circulated to the whole group. Francesco and I brought hard copies of the report for all the participants to the following session, and read and commented on it with them. Given that these reports were written individually in a space other than the research space, they offered alternative perspectives and served to express critiques, order the material emerging from the workshops, progress the group's thinking, and build up a shared language and lexicon among the research group.

Sessions were also audio recorded. Conversations may be seen as a way of generating group 'data'; they are also the material expression of the collective level of coordination and co-construction of meaning. Photos and videos were the other media used to record what was produced. I viewed the session reports as an individual format, and the conversations on them as a group format.

Auto/biographical data were produced prior to, throughout, and after the research proper, via interviews, a research diary, and pictures. My reflexive connecting of the participants' biographies with my own autobiography continued through writing.

### **c) My methodological spiral**

Sessions were originally intended to follow Formenti's and Heron's sequence of experiential, aesthetic, propositional, and practical knowledge. However, the fourth stage of identifying deliberate action was soon abandoned as inappropriate for these research groups; hence, experience, aesthetic representation and collective understanding were ritualized in the spiral of knowledge represented below. Along the unfolding line of the spiral, I have drawn another spiralling line to represent the presence, at each step of the sequence, of the other forms of

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<sup>84</sup> A picture of the folder may be seen in the 'theme analysis' section of the Bicocca group case study, because some participants used them to aesthetically represent their theory about the research theme.

knowledge (affective, imaginal, cognitive, and practical knowledge are invariably mixed up together, to some degree). This consideration is particularly relevant to the sessions at which ‘reading, writing and conversation’ were used at both the stage of experience and that of aesthetic representation. The closing conversation in each session was devoted to becoming reflexive at a meta level, with a view to producing collective thinking and satisfying theorization as defined by Munari (1993) by connecting the elements that had emerged in the course of the day.

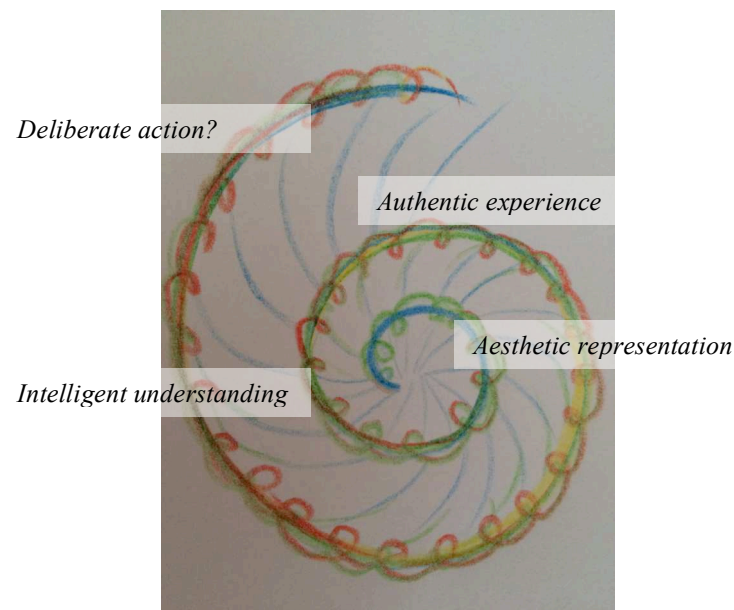


Fig. 3 My own representation of Formenti’s methodological spiral, based on Vitale (2012).

I worked closely with my colleague to design the programme for each individual session. We held long Skype calls between Italy and the UK to discuss each choice, in light of our epistemological premises and expectations. Setting, techniques, tools, wording, pace, the sequencing of individual, pair and group work: all details were discussed. The following ideas guided us in designing each individual session:

- making intentional use of physical space, e.g., by inviting participants to choose where in the room they wished to work on the assigned tasks of writing, drawing, etc.;
- creating a symbolic holding space by constructing an appropriate setting for autobiographical work, e.g. sitting in large or small circles, working on the floor, sitting in a semicircle like spectators at a show;
- weaving reading, writing and conversation together to materialize the stabilizing and negotiating power of ‘languaging’ at the individual and group levels (Formenti, 1998);

- holding a final meta-reflexive conversation, in order to help participants observe their own strategies of knowing;
- using metaphorical language to approach the research object abductively rather than directly (Fabbri and Munari, 2005), e.g., by talking about ‘roots’ at the first session, and ‘rivers’ at the second;
- using different kinds of writing (autobiographical, imaginative, epistemological), and particularly creative writing (Cupane, 2009) to elicit multiple interpretations and provide greater possibilities of self-reflection (Formenti, 1998).

#### **d) Adaptations of the methodology**

I now briefly summarize adaptations that were necessary but are not analysed in the case studies, given that they are not the main focus of this study, although they offered other views on my practice. I also introduce Bolla’s (2009) ‘evocative objects’ that were generatively integrated to my methodology, as I am going to show in the case studies and summarize in the Conclusions.

#### *Reflexive cycle*

The group conversation at the end of the second session induced us to eliminate the deliberate action stage of the spiral, as it did not interest the group. At a supervision session, Formenti agreed that this stage might be inappropriate, if participants had not signed up for the research on the basis of a specific interest in changing their practice. During the follow-up phase, I observed more active involvement on the part of the participants in defining how to wind up the research activity: this, which was an outcome of the co-operative research process, I would now call deliberate action. For example, in Bicocca some participants proposed organizing an exhibition of their creative work in the Department, so that their work might be ‘heard about’ in the Department as an innovative practice. This has not yet been possible; deliberate actions raise questions concerning the authorship of research and its dissemination, aspects to which I return in a dedicated paragraph on ethical dilemmas (in Chapter Nine) and in the conclusions of this thesis.

#### *Clinica della Formazione*<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> This is a difficult term to translate, given that ‘*clinica*’ is not intended here in a therapeutic sense, but as an approach to ‘understand[ing] the pedagogical verities about formation of which the “authors” are holders, consciously or unconsciously’ (Franza, 2002, p. 306, my translation). The word ‘clinical’ in this context is derived from the Greek terms ‘*klinè*’ (bed) and ‘*klino*’ (to lean over), implying that the researcher or practitioner ‘bends over’ the object of their research/intervention in order to develop an understanding of it. The term ‘*formazione*’ also is problematic, as noted above (see fn. 25). In sum, the clinical-educational approach (Franza, 2002; Massa, 1992) is a method that may be applied to theoretical study, research, counselling and supervision, and is designed to explain the latent pedagogical dimensions in the ordinary course of educational and formative processes.



During the performative weekend, Francesco and I introduced another transformative research method, drawn from the ‘clinical-educational’ approach that he had been practicing for a number of years, namely the ‘anaphoric’ use of film (from the Greek *anaphora* meaning repetition) as an external reference to one’s lived experience with the power to introduce another perspective on one’s story. I later present the reflections that this generated in some participants.

### *Evocative objects*

Cultural objects – literary texts, films, maps – were used at the opening of the various sessions as ‘evocative’ of free associative thinking (Bollas, 2009), with the power to generate writing and conversation. According to Bollas, ‘there are many different ways to think; one way we think ourselves is through our engagement with, and use of, evocative objects’ (2009, p. 2). In other words, a person ‘encounters’ an object via physical perception and action, and thinks/knows via embodied use of that object:

As we move about, we live in an evocative object world that is so only because objects have an integrity of their own. This integrity of an object – the character of its thingness – has an evocative processional potential. Upon use by the self, it may – or may not – put the individual through a complex psychosomatic experience. (Bollas, 2009, p. 79)

Bollas implies that ‘we do not just see them [the objects]. We experience them’ (ibid. p. 80), and so I invited my participants to experience ‘cultural objects’ as triggers at a less conscious level. By cultural object, I mean an aesthetic representation that includes multiple levels of meaning, and is a product of human history in a specific time and place. The evocative use of cultural objects can help to access the complexity of subjective relationships with knowing, culture, not knowing, education and schooling, expert knowledge, and so on. This use of cultural artefacts is not ‘clinical-educational’, although it rests on psychoanalytical ideas; rather, it draws on a constructivist-systemic and performative view of learning by inviting subjects to interact with objects and their representations of them from a position of personal engagement. This practice is recursively presented and analysed throughout the entire thesis.

### **Programme of each research session**

The following is a detailed description of the research sessions, which may serve as a ‘map’ to the two case studies presented in the next chapters.

#### **1) First session**

The aim was for participants to get to know each other and form a group, while accessing autobiographical memories of knowing; hence participants' self-presentations were integrated into the research dispositive (Formenti, 1998).

1. Choosing an image: Each participant chose one image (from a selection of 40) to represent his/her professional self, and positioned it about the room.
2. Short writing exercise: In their personal notebook, each participant individually answered three questions: 'What image did I choose? What is in the picture? Why did I choose this picture?' (5 minutes).
3. Observation: With music playing in the background, participants walked into the room and observed the images, so as to become acquainted with the physical and the imaginative space around them.
4. Reading: Participants sat around the table and read their text aloud.
5. Construction of the group: The facilitators presented the research aim and object, programme, methodology, 'data collection' tools, and ethical guidelines (a research and not a therapy group, the right to leave, non-judgmental listening, imaginative openness).
6. Reflexive writing: Starting out from the input: 'Try to go to the roots of your relationship with knowing. Where is your relationship to knowing rooted?'
7. Poetic writing: After a break, participants composed an individual poetic extract in pairs (Cupane, 2009), by reading their text to their partner and allowing him/her to choose words and short sentences that resonated, then swapping roles, and finally composing a poem by versifying the selected words only.
8. Reading: The poems were read to the entire group.
9. Conversation: The participants were encouraged to become reflexive about what had happened during the day, taking as much time as necessary (usually 20-45 min).

## **2) Second session**

The aim was to explore participant's stories of learning via different routes to embodiment.

1. Meditation: Participants sat comfortably and attended to their breathing and body.
2. Report reading: Participants read the report silently, selected words and sentences that resonate, and read them aloud to the group.
3. Ethics: Ethics forms (based on the model proposed in Merrill and West, 2009) were compiled. Participants' informed consent was requested, as may be seen in the full document appended, for my use of the narratives produced and any pictures that I would take of the group at work (see Appendix n. 4). In the pictures – taken to illustrate the physical and symbolic use of the research space (sitting in a circle, on the ground, etc.) –, the participants would be potentially recognizable, although I

undertook not to show their faces so as to protect their anonymity insofar as possible. Participants were allowed the time to read the documents and ask questions, which they did. In Bicocca, some enquired about the other university and its Christian tradition, which I explained expressed a critical concern for society and did not affect our research space (or my supervision) in any dogmatic way. This kind of conversation was part of the construction of a shared space in which questions could be asked about its hidden premises.

4. Body activation: After a physical warm up, participants found a spot in the room from which to listen to the facilitator reading a short paragraph from the book by C. Guérard (2010), *Piccola filosofia del mare* (Little Philosophy of the Sea). During a guided imagination session, participants moved their bodies to represent water.
5. Drawing: On an A2 sheet of black or white paper, participants individually drew their rivers of learning, using a mix of techniques, based on the input: ‘What does your river of learning look like? Where does it flow? What shape is it? Who lives on its shores, in its waters, on its bottom?’.
6. Imaginative writing: Remaining in front of the drawing, each participant wrote a short text from the perspective of the drawing as if it were presenting itself, beginning with: ‘Let me introduce myself...’. The text was to be structured around the following points: ‘My name is...I was... I am... I will be...’, ‘This is my shape because...’, ‘I have a story of... to tell’.
7. Observation: Participants walked into the room and observed the set of drawings.
8. Composition: Participants composed their drawings together into a broader picture on the floor, by moving them around, and were helped by the facilitators to ask questions and make comments until a satisfying composition was identified.
9. Epistemological writing: Each participant wrote a few lines in answer to the question ‘If a learning biography were a river...’.
10. Reading: The texts were read in the group.
11. Fictional writing: After a break, participants worked on their CVs in pairs by reading the other’s CV, extracting resonant words, and individually composing a short story using the selected words. The story was then read back to the other partner and briefly discussed among the two.
12. Autobiographical writing: After reading the short story on the other’s CV, each participant wrote an autobiographical episode that came to mind based on the title: ‘The time that’.
13. Reading: The autobiographical texts were read aloud to the group.
14. Conversation: In conversation, the participants became reflexive about what had happened during the session.

### 3) Third session

The aim of the third session was to explore the strategies and metaphors of knowledge used by participants.

1. Report reading: The report on the previous session was read and commented on.
2. Choosing a card: The facilitators displayed to the participants the entire set of 'metaphor of knowledge' cards (Fabbri and Munari, 2010)<sup>86</sup> and each chose the image that best represented their approach to knowing, and after some minutes another card as second choice. The remaining cards were removed.
3. Short writing exercise: Each participant wrote a short answer to the questions: 'Why have you chosen these images? Can you explain them?' (5 minutes).
4. Reading and conversation: After the texts were read out to the group, the facilitators interacted with the group, providing information about the metaphors from Fabbri and Munari's (2010) book.
5. Assemblage: Sitting on the ground in a circle, each participant constructed an individual *assemblage* – an object made by assembling recycled materials on a small backing – representing his or her metaphor of knowledge.<sup>87</sup>
6. Imaginative writing: Remaining in front of the assembled object, each participant wrote a text from the perspective of the *assemblage* as if it were presenting itself, starting with: 'Let me introduce myself...'. The text was structured around the following points: 'My name is...', 'I have a story to tell...', 'When [name of the participant] meets me he/she feels...'
7. Reading and conversation: The texts were read aloud to the group and a short conversation ensued.
8. Reflexive writing: Now adopting a fresh perspective on the *assemblage*, each participant wrote a text in answer the question: 'How does this object speak to you of your profession?'
9. Reading and conversation: The texts were read out to the group and a short conversation followed.

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<sup>86</sup> Fabbri and Munari (2010), based on their training and research work in LEO (Laboratory of Operative Epistemology), action-based laboratories designed to explore the theme of knowledge, have developed a repertoire of 10 metaphors that are frequently used in cognition to order what we learn (see Appendix n. 1).

<sup>87</sup> I am grateful to Remida Varese (near Milan) for helping me to source the recycled materials used in my study. Inspired by the work of Italian designer Bruno Munari, the REMIDA project was created in Reggio Emilia in 1996. The network currently comprises Remida Milan and 17 other centres worldwide, and promotes proactive environmentalism by attributing value to reject materials and imperfect industrial products. *Assemblage* is used in creative workshops to explore objects and their features, but also in training contexts to observe the epistemological operations and the metaphors of knowledge inherent in material constructions. See <http://www.reggiochildren.it/attivita/formazione/workshop-per-aziende-e-professionisti/>; <http://www.muba.it/en/schools>. Accessed: 26 December 2016.

10. Poetic writing: After a break, each participant produced a sound expansion (Cupane, 2009) of the word ‘*sapere*’ (or of the word ‘knowing’ in the English group).<sup>88</sup> For a few minutes, all the words brought to mind by the sound of the keyword were noted down, participants having been instructed to accept all the ideas that came to them. Afterwards, each participant composed a poem about knowing by choosing from the words identified.
11. Reading: The poems were read to the group.
12. Conversation: In conversation, the participants became reflexive about what had happened during the day.

#### 4) Fourth session

The aim was to explore participants’ relationship with a mentor.<sup>89</sup>

1. Report reading: the report on the previous session was read and commented on.
2. Reading a literary text: J.L. Borges (1964) *The circular ruins*<sup>90</sup> was read aloud to the group to invite an affective and sensuous ‘con-vocation’.<sup>91</sup>
3. Individual study: Each participant reread the Borges text individually in silence while underlining passages that evoked the figure of the mentor.
4. Conversation: A conversation developed based on the participants’ underlining.
5. Drawing: After a break, participants produced individual drawings of a mentor figure, on an A2 sheet of black or white paper, using a mixture of techniques.
6. WAY writing: Remaining in front of the drawing, each participant drew up a list of 10 adjectives describing the mentor portrayed (‘He or she is...’).<sup>92</sup>
7. Reading and presentation: Participants gave an individual account of how they had constructed their own mentor portrait and read out their WAY list.

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<sup>88</sup> Leonora Cupane proposes an exercise from her formative practice which she calls the ‘scale of sound’ approach to making poetry (Cupane, 2009, p. 57). We can listen to words at two intertwined levels, on a physical scale of sound and on a mental scale of meaning, although we tend to forget the first. Sound resonance de-automatizes language, opens a door onto ‘autobiographical sense’, to the sensuous power of language to touch us, and ‘to “make” truth (poetry from the Latin *poiein*, to make), well beyond the established logical order and code’ (ibid. p. 51, my translation).

<sup>89</sup> In the *Odyssey*, Mentor is a friend of Odysseus who puts him in charge of his son Telemachus when he left for the Trojan War. In the business literature, a mentor is defined as someone who imparts wisdom and knowledge to a less experienced colleague, yet other literature in adult and imaginal education suggests that the figure of the mentor is necessarily more ambiguous than that. See Mottana (1996); and notes available at: [http://www.formazione.unimib.it/Default.asp?idPagine=178&funzione=pagina\\_persona&personale=56&page\\_per\\_s=187](http://www.formazione.unimib.it/Default.asp?idPagine=178&funzione=pagina_persona&personale=56&page_per_s=187) (Accessed on 26 December 2016).

<sup>90</sup> The use of this short story by J.L. Borges was introduced into the formative programmes of the clinical-educational approach by Angelo Franza, though not to explore the figure of the mentor as we did here.

<sup>91</sup> The reader switches midway in the text at the sentence ‘... he dreamt of a beating heart’, which comes across as a narrative turning point underlining the shift from a rational to a loving relationship with knowing, and as a strong evocative image.

<sup>92</sup> Invented by Bugental and Zelen and adapted in the 1950s by Kuhn and McPortland, the WAY (Who Are You?) test is a psycho-social research tool that Fabbri and Formenti (1991, p. 46) have used reflexively in qualitative research contexts. I adapted it here to encourage reflexivity about a portrayed other (the mentor in this case).

8. Autobiographical writing: Each participant wrote a text based on the instruction: ‘Write about an episode in your learning life in which your relationship with a mentor played a significant part, and which you recall with pleasure or displeasure’.
9. Reading and conversation: In conversation, participants read their accounts of, or orally described, their chosen autobiographical episodes and became reflexive about what had happened during the session.

## **5) Fifth session**

The aim was to access the embodied dimension of the self in action through the use of performative languages.

### *Saturday*

The programme on the first day was focused on the inner and outer spaces in participants’ learning biographies, their relationship with their bodies, and physical and symbolic space, with a view to gradually moving towards performativity.

1. Report reading: The report on the previous session was read and commented on.
2. Oral narrative: Participants created the outline of a map of Italy or the UK, as appropriate, on the ground with sticky tape, and one at a time narrated their learning journey while moving around the map and identifying the main landmarks in their story. Narrators then individually retraced their paths in silence (10 minutes per participant in total).
3. Choice of a place and body part: All together, the participants entered the outline map, stood at their most significant place, and identified a body part associated with that place and time.
4. Imaginative storytelling: Participants divided into pairs and told their partner about the episode that they had in mind, as though the body part were telling the story. But each partner first showed the part of their body that they had selected to the other and allowed him or her to look at it in silence (10 minutes in total).
5. Imaginative writing: Each participant wrote an account of their episode from the point of view of the body part.
6. Theatrical warm up: Each participant underlined in their text a significant sentence uttered by the body part, and memorized it as a theatrical line. During a warm up, participants were guided to walk around the room, rehearse their sentence and identify a gesture to accompany it.
7. Improvisation: The group improvised a dialogue among the body parts by using gestures, sentences, patterns of movement, and devising an ending as a group (5 minutes).

8. Watching a film: After a break, participants watched the film *A Late Quartet* by Yaron Zilberman (2012), proposed with the anaphoric function of helping them to decentre from their autobiographical experience and reflexively observe what watching the film had produced in them.

The choice of this film was not random, although only half-consciously so. I had set out to find a film that evoked the lived relationships, desires, affectivities, eroticism, aesthetic pleasure, values and imagination of a professional life. The key narrative elements that I was in search of included a crisis of some kind, a professional lead character – but not in the field of education, so to make the film sufficiently removed from participants’ own professional lives and not pedantic –, and no moralistic resolution – making it suitable for fostering open dialogue. The best match with these requirements was identified by an old friend of mine who is an economist and musician and who suggested *A Late Quartet*, a filmic representation of crisis in a quartet of classical musicians in New York City. The film spoke in the embodied language of music, which was key, and elicited interesting conversations around passion, love, chaos, and the unconscious in professional lives.

9. ‘Clinical-reflexive’ writing:<sup>93</sup> Each participant wrote answers to three questions: ‘Identify the scene from the movie which from a “formative” perspective you feel resonates the most with your professional experience’, ‘What emotions characterize this scene?’, and ‘Imagine yourself in the movie, say what role you would interpret and how you would act and why’.
13. Conversation: Drawing on the film, participants became reflexive in conversation about what had happened during that day’s session.<sup>94</sup>

### *Sunday*

The aim of the second day was to lead participants to make full use of performative languages with a view to exploring the corporeality of action in professional situations.

1. Autobiographical writing: After a warm-up conversation, each participant produced a written text based on the instruction: ‘Write about an episode in your professional experience that is significant for you, and that has caused a change in the way you practice your profession’.
2. Reading: Participants divided into two small groups and read one another their texts.

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<sup>93</sup> See the method for analysing film proposed by Angelo Franza in Franza and Mottana (1997).

<sup>94</sup> The conversation on the film took place on Sunday morning in CCCU, as we had to adapt to the context and the needs of the group.

3. Choice of an episode: In each of the small groups, the participants chose one significant episode among those read out that was relevant to the research question, and in which they all found interesting resonances.
4. Role-play writing: In the small groups, the participants worked with the help of the facilitators to produce a script for role-playing the selected episode (Capranico, 1997).
5. Role-play: Group A role-played the script prepared by Group B, while the others observed (20 minutes). Afterwards, all participants took note of their thoughts and feelings.
6. Conversation: Participants exchanged observations from inside and outside of the role-play.
7. Steps 5 and 6 were repeated with the small groups in inverted roles.
8. Theatrical warm-up: After a break, the facilitators led a physical theatrical warm-up.<sup>95</sup>
9. Preparation of the *mise en scène*: The two groups swapped texts once more so that each group could work on its own initial episode again. Drawing on the observations on the role-play, each group generated a new ‘script’ (the words to say) and a ‘psycho-corporeal score’ (the relationship of bodies, space, audience, gestures, voices, interpretation).
10. *Mise en scène*: Consecutively, the two groups performed their *mises en scène* for the other group-audience and the facilitators.<sup>96</sup>
11. Conversation: Participants become reflexive in conversation about what had happened.

## 6) Sixth session

The aim of this half-day of activity was to co-operatively draw conclusions from the research, by constructing theories in response to the research question.

1. Report reading: The report on the previous session was read and commented on.
2. Individual study: Each participant analysed the contents of his or her own portfolio and personal notebook, in search of material to answer the research question: ‘In our stories, what connection might there be between our relationship with knowing and processes of construction of our professional selves?’ (45 minutes).

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<sup>95</sup> In CCCU we adapted the programme for the smaller group and shorter time available to finish with the two role-play activities. However, even the criss-cross role-play was difficult to implement given that the participants had other commitments and came or left at different times.

<sup>96</sup> Via theatrical action, a group ‘interpretation’ of the professional episode was offered, in which ‘the body knew’ and told more than had been planned to say. This metaphorical use of theatre within formative and research contexts was developed by my colleague Francesco Cappa, drawing on the work of Jerzi Grotowski. See Cappa (2016; 2015).



3. Group theories: Participants worked together in small groups to construct a local theory in response to the research question, and represent it as a map.
4. Presentation: Each small group presented its theory (10 minutes each).
5. Conversation: Taking the theories as their point of departure, participants were invited to ask questions, make observations and critical comments, while the facilitators helped the group to collectively answer the research question.
6. Epistemological writing: Each participant wrote an individual title for the group's overall theory, and placed it beside the group representation.

## 7) Follow-up

The aim of this half-day of activity was to examine together as a group, after an interval of some months, the effects of the research in the professional lives of the participants.

1. Warm-up conversation: Using their notes and titles for the group's theory as a point of departure, the participants exchanged their thoughts about the research conclusions and the post-research period.
2. Object making: Using an aesthetic technique of their own choice, each participant individually created an object representing their response to the question: 'Starting from the effects of the Embodied Narratives Workshop, what changes did you notice or experience in relation to your way of being a professional in education? Give a title to your object'.<sup>97</sup>
3. Presentation: Participants orally presented their object and how they had gone about constructing it.
4. Co-operative action: After a break, the facilitators invited the group to collectively identify a way of winding up the follow-up session that might be meaningful for the group.

## Data set

Taken together, the co-operative workshops and auto/biographical reflection generated the data that I have classified in the table shown in Appendix n. 3. I divide the narrative material into three categories according to who produced it: (A) the research subject or research group (in Bicocca or CCCU), or (B) the researcher, or (C) the co-facilitator. In Category B, I have included the auto/biographical interviews conducted with my mother, father and grandmother. Although I refer to it as 'narrative', the material is not necessarily exclusively verbal (written or audio recorded). I view visual material as alternative kinds of narratives presented in the form of artwork, produced by me or the research subjects (drawings, *assemblages*, mixed

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<sup>97</sup> I recognize this instruction was biased (in that it implied that there had been a change). Nonetheless, the participants interpreted it reflexively in different ways.

technique, pictures), or visual objects (a card or a picture) chosen by an individual as meaningful for them. I also recorded videos of the groups' theatrical performances, which however I ultimately decided not to analyse, as I explain further on in this dissertation.

In presenting the data, I have done my best to protect the participants by anonymizing them, although in some cases (my family) this was not entirely possible because of the nature of their relationship with me. Therefore, I prepared different tailored ethics forms for the workshop participants (in English and in Italian, the English version is attached appendix), and for my family members, whom I indicate as 'mother', 'father' and 'grandmother'. I am very thankful to my co-facilitator Francesco who gave me permission to make full use of the audio and written material that he produced with me and for me, for the purposes of this thesis.

### **Data analysis**

Before moving on to the case studies, I should outline the nature of the data analysis that I brought to bear on the narratives collected.

This thesis explores two main questions: one concerns *what* research subjects (and the researcher) were able to narrate about their own relationships with knowing and their professional selves; and the other relates to *how* the stories were elicited, within a specific biographical setting designed to generate rich descriptions that were reflexive, inclusive, and open to change. With these questions in mind, I produced two case studies, one for the Bicocca and one for the CCCU research group; for each subsample, I first analysed the process undergone by the group as a whole and the way in which the co-operative methodology had been interpreted. Against this background, I next analysed selected participant biographies that provided insights into issues of authenticity in professional lives, and exemplified processes of integrating different parts of the self as well as different ways of knowing. My auto/biographical analysis of how I myself experienced the research process constitutes a third case study, adding another viewpoint to the whole, as in Richardson's crystallization process: 'there is no one "correct" telling of this event. Each telling, like light hitting a crystal, reflects a different perspective on this incident' (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005, p. 8). It is worth clarifying that I assume that the validity of my 'biographical research [method] can be challenged from a variety of perspectives, including by historians and post-structuralists' (Merrill and West, 2009, p. 162). While the former might trivialize my 'generating endless detail' (ibid. p. 163), the latter could denounce 'life histories and the selves composing them as little more than effects of language' (ibid. p. 167). By taking a critical realist position, I claim with Barbara Merrill and Linden West that my method is valid – as the Latin etymology of '*validus*' suggests, i.e. strong, powerful, effective – insofar as it offers subtle insights that would be 'easily lost or missed completely in other [more

conventional and standardized] methods' (ibid. p. 165) and includes in its analysis, the conditional ways and relational, discursive and situated context in which the 'data' originated.

Strength could be defined by reference to narrative richness, to the quality of our knowing and its power to speak to others in new ways. [...] What matters is the quality of research relationship, and the extent to which this facilitates deeper forms of insight and wider meaning. [...] The claim to validity of biographical research lies, fundamentally, in challenging epistemological reductionism and superficiality. (ibid. pp. 164-165)

In keeping with this argument, my analysis comprised the following steps.

### **a) Analysis of the group process**

At the group level I analyzed:

- the final group conversations from each session,
- the session report (prepared by a different individual participant for each session),
- participants' probing of the report,
- group conversations that sometimes ensued on probing the report.

I chose to use these data because they suited my purpose of making sense of how the group functioned as a collective mind (i.e., as a group of individual subjects that influence one another). While I am mindful of the fact that a *micro* (subjective) and a *macro* (the wider context) level were also always present, here I focused on the *meso* level of the group, asking myself: *what are the steps that the group goes through, in a co-operative inquiry, in order to construct a collective mind?* The constructivist epistemology informing my approach cautioned me not to take the co-operative group as a given, but rather to attend to how it might have developed throughout the research process. Following Reason (1988), I too am doubtful that the facilitator(s) of a co-operative group can be a participant-researcher like any other from the start. Francesco and I, in fact, strongly directed the activities, timing, choice of objects, rules of the game – we were the ones who put the dispositive in place. Therefore, I examined the interplay between facilitators *and* participants in the process of learning, interpretation, and construction of a local research practice. Participants' professional lives, ages and gendered positions were also present in the data. In analysing the emergence of a 'collective mind' I was guided by:

- 1) The metaphors (Formenti, 2008; Fabbri and Munari, 2005; Lakoff and Johnson, 1980; Bateson, 1979) used in the group, which represented an embodied understanding of the game being played by the members of the group;
- 2) The 'embarrassments' (Sclavi, 2003) that I auto/biographically (Merrill and West, 2009) perceived in the course of my interaction with the group – which in a language

of transformation would be described as the dilemmas (Mezirow, 1991) that I faced when things did not match my expectations.

### **b) Analysis of the auto/biographical narrative(s)**

Finding my way through the individual narratives was difficult, given that the visual and verbal material was strongly heterogeneous. While struggling with this ‘mass’ of data, I invited my supervisors and other colleagues in CCCU to a methodological workshop, and asked them to look at my material (a small part of which already seemed like a lot!) and discussed with them how they would analyse it. Discovering that they did not have clear ideas about what to do either came as a relief to me and gave me confidence to search for my own way out of my problem. I showed the ‘experts’ my poems composed from the research material, and my use of pictures, and I felt hopeful that I might emerge from this chaos with something meaningful.

I based my initial construction of the four biographies on West’s auto/biographical template – which he kindly passed on to me –, an ‘analytic space through which to understand more of the whole [...], identify and refine themes [...] and illustrate them with extensive quotation’ (Merrill and West, 2009, p. 137). This possibility of ‘ “play[ing]” imaginatively and thoughtfully with [...] our engagement with others and their stories’ (ibid) evolved for me into writing as inquiry (Richardson, 1997), a method that enriched my auto/biographical orientation by offering playing with language(s) as an additional tool for developing my understanding of my material by reflecting and refracting it.

The stories that I constructed from Beatrice’s, Federico’s, Vanessa’s and Dilbert’s material show that, during the co-operative process, each of these participants uncovered and modified his or her own relationship with knowing. The poems that I constructed by extracting resonant words or fragments from their prose material (Cupane, 2009) made for a deeper level of interpretation by engaging my whole self in the process of attending to other narratives. Other poems, writings and drawings are my own original material and I analyze these towards the end of my dissertation with a view to examining my own knowing and becoming.

### **Framework of analysis**

My analytical approach does not entail reconstructing what actually happened or attempting to penetrate the participants’ minds; rather it engages me, as the researcher, in a reflexive dialogue with the data. In this, I follow auto/biographical (West, 2004) and, in part, co-operative research paradigms (Reason, 1994). Here, analysis is conceived as partly intersubjective (i.e., as taking place within the cooperative process), yet the main researcher retains responsibility for selecting her own lens and focus. I now introduce my chosen lens,

while a discussion on ethics in Chapter Ten will articulate some of the dilemmas that I encountered in bringing it to bear.

The theoretical framework of analysis that has emerged from my reflexive engagement with the material, in light of both the content (the participants' narratives) and context (methodology) levels of my research question, is interdisciplinary: specifically, it is sociological (Ball and Olmedo, 2013; Barnett, 2011, 2008; Gewirtz *et al.*, 2009; Charlot, 1997), psychological (Heron, 1992; Belenky *et al.*, 1986), and psychoanalytical (Phillips, 2012; Verhaeghe, 2012). Throughout my analytical journey, I trace recurrent idealizations of knowledge and knowledgeable others, exploring this theme in the research material and implicitly in the literature.

As my analysis proceeds, the research method of auto/biographically oriented co-operative inquiry (Formenti, 2008; Heron, 1996) is progressively illuminated and challenged by the introduction of sociological and psychoanalytic perspectives. Informed by the notions of social roles or personae (originally in Goffman, 1959) and of knowledge relations in educational practice and research contexts (Charlot, 1997), I find particular merit in Belenky and Stanton's (2000) critique of the ideal communicative space proposed by Mezirow (1991), whose rationalistic logic risks excluding diverse and marginalized people and approaches. Hence, Winnicott's (1971), Mosconi's (1996) and Bollas's (2009) ideas about cultural experience and its transitional objects begin to enter into dialogue with the material, providing insight into the making and remaking of knowing and self within the research process.

On completion of my analysis, I articulate my understanding of these concepts in Chapter Nine. For indeed my interpretative process is ongoing, guided by an 'epistemology of crisis' that treats knowing and living as part of the same process (Sclavi, 2003; Fabbri and Formenti, 1991; Maturana, 1990). Throughout the dissertation, I draw on auto/biography (Merrill and West, 2009; Stanley, 1992), and increasingly on writing as inquiry (Richardson, 1997), because these practices provide scaffolding for creatively exploring the micro/meso/macro levels of the research experience. Consequently, my framework of analysis remains primarily implicit during my discussion of the case studies, but is taken up again and expanded on in the Conclusions, where I also make recommendations concerning future educational research.

## **Summary**

In this chapter I have presented my research methodology, its starting premises and progressive adjustments to it, my recruitment strategy, and detailed descriptions of the research programme implemented with two groups, one in Milan and one in Canterbury, over a cycle of six encounters plus a follow up session based on biographically oriented co-operative inquiry (Formenti, 2008; Heron, 1996). Between January and November 2015, the participants (academics, practitioners, and researchers) met to investigate aspects of their

knowing and self with a focus on: (1) roots of knowing, (2) learning biography, (3) strategies of knowing, (4) mentors, and (5) professional practice, followed by a theorizing and conclusion phase. Narratives of different kinds – not just verbal – were generated, in a variety of formats, and recorded for research, following ethical principles – confidentiality, informed consent, ownership – and biographical research practices (Merrill and West, 2009). Handling the resulting corpus of mixed narratives was difficult, and among my colleagues no one seemed to have the ‘right’ method to hand; this somehow made it easier for me to find my own. Involving an ‘expert’ colleague in the design and facilitation of the workshops enriched my learning via crises and unlearning, and made me more sensitive to the embedded nature of research. In my auto/biographical practice, the drawing of a snake under the sea-soul revealed the possibility of accessing deep meaning in my inquiry through the embodiment of knowledge. This was the route I undertook in my data analysis, which involved connecting self and other, as well as more and less conscious aspects of how we know and live, by drawing on different languages to explore knowing ‘playfully’.



## *Chapter Five*

### **Case Study 1**

#### **Introduction**

In this chapter, I present my first case study, based on the inquiry conducted with the Milano-Bicocca group of participants. In relation to this group, I focus on analysing the co-operative process through which a ‘collective mind’ was formed, in terms of how we developed a shared and satisfying way of languaging and coordinating our research activity as a group. In reflecting on the collective process, I seek to answer the second part of my research question, concerning *how* a co-operative setting (Formenti, 2008; Heron, 1996) leads to the emergence of a co-operating group of co-researchers, with the ability to connect the intellect with the unconscious, including the body, the heart, imagination and playfulness.

My analytical approach involved paying attention to metaphors (highlighted in bold font) and crises that arose while the meaning of the research, the research task, and the roles of the inquirers were being negotiated. For the purposes of these case studies, I have omitted group dynamics from my analysis. As a possible map of the emergence of a co-operating inquiry group, I propose a sequence of five steps which I have labelled: Chaos, Positioning, Individuation, Desire, and ‘Playing’. Conceptualizing the process as taking place in steps encourages us not to take the cooperative nature of the inquiry for granted, but rather, from a perspective of structural coupling and uncertainty of knowing (Maturana, 1990), invites a focus on how cooperation gradually unfolds. Naturally, intertwined with the emergence of the cooperative group was fresh auto/biographical learning of my own, sometimes acquired with great difficulty.

To situate the activities that took place during sessions, I follow the example of Vitale (2012) and present them in the form of a spiral (see Figs. 4 to 8 on the next page) that goes through the four stages of knowledge originally proposed in Formenti (2008) and outlined at length in Chapter One. Afterwards I introduce the dramatis personae of the participants in the Bicocca group. Clearly, I selected the pieces of text presented in this and the other case studies, and so this is my representation of the research material to some extent – the extracts bear out my general line of argument. Nonetheless, because this was an exercise in co-operative inquiry, I also allow the participants to speak for themselves. Therefore, at the end of my analysis of the cooperative group process, I draw conclusions that are based on the participants’ reflections.



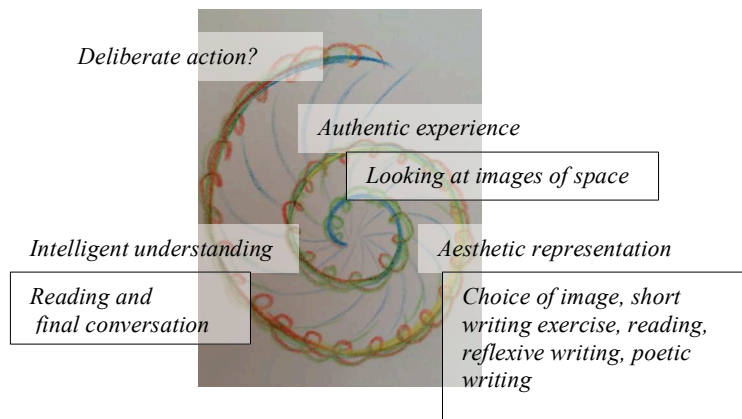


Fig. 4 Methodological spiral followed in the first research session.

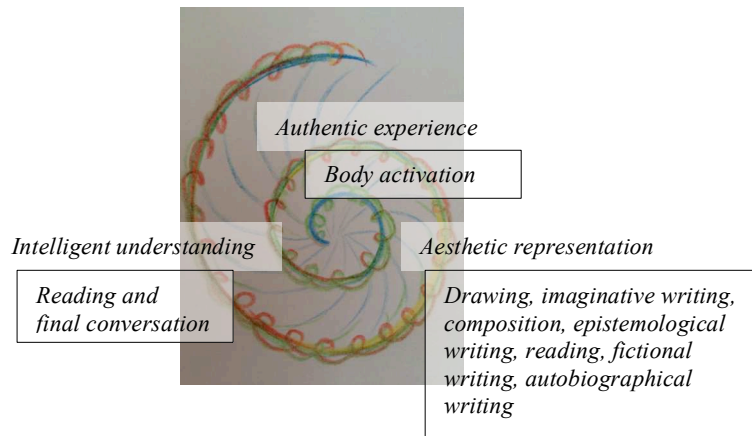


Fig. 5 Methodological spiral followed in the second research session.

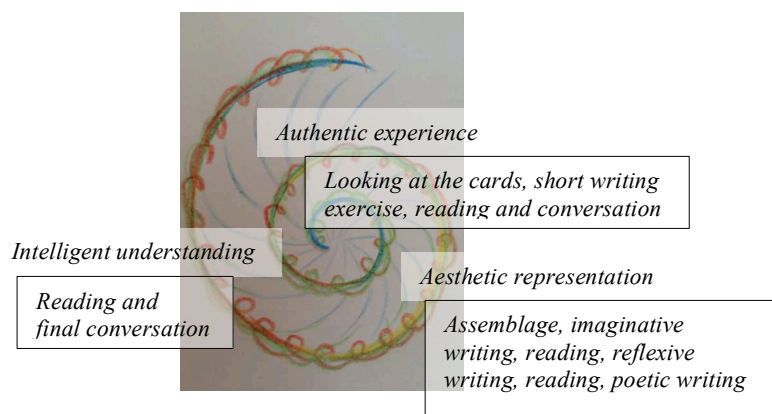


Fig. 6 Methodological spiral followed in the third research session.

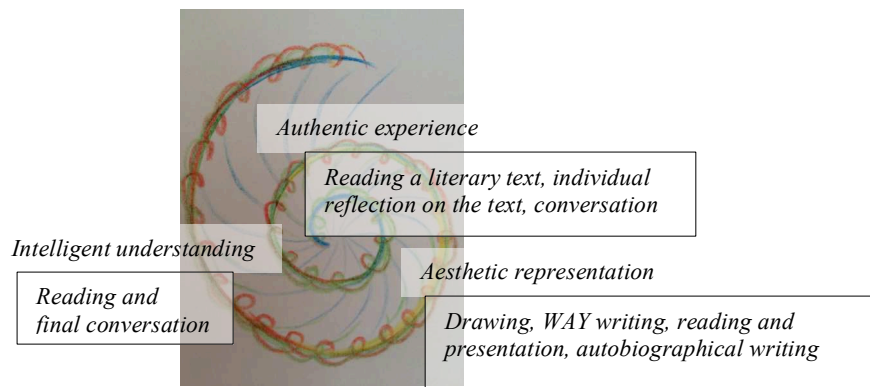


Fig. 7 Methodological spiral followed in the fourth research session.

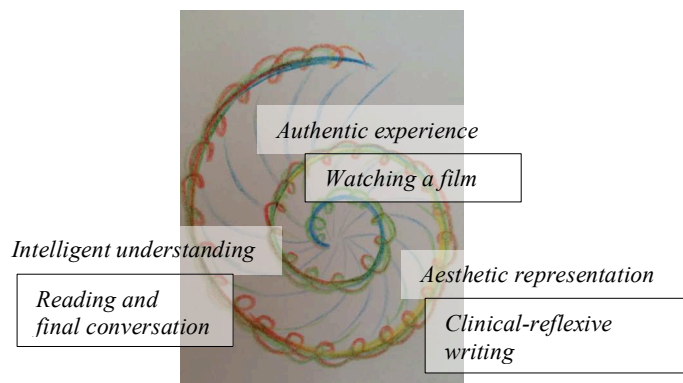


Fig. 8 Methodological spiral followed in the fifth research session.

### **Dramatis Personae at the *Università di Milano-Bicocca***

Anna, 1990

A professional educator at a day centre for families with 4-10-year-old children in Milan, at the time of the research, Anna was studying for her MA in Education at the University of Milano-Bicocca. She had previously taken part in the Theatre Laboratory offered as part of the BA in Education.

Alberto, 1986

A professional educator in a residential child care centre outside of Milan, after conducting fieldwork in South America as part of an MA in Ethnological and Anthropological Sciences Alberto had now enrolled on a professional master's programme for educators at the University of Milano-Bicocca. He too had previously taken part in the Department's Theatre Laboratory.

Federico, 1986

A PhD Student in Education in the field of Didactics of Literature and General Didactics at the University of Milano-Bicocca, Federico was conducting his doctoral research on the link between fictional immersive experience and learning, especially in primary and secondary school settings. He also coordinated training for teachers in general didactics and didactics of literature. He held an MA in Philosophy from the University of Milan.

Nadia, 1977

A dance therapist, dance educator and performer, Nadia had worked with children and teachers in infant and primary schools, as well as with adults. Since 2004, she has been collaborating with the Department of Human Sciences and Education at the University of Milano-Bicocca where at the time of the research she was doing a PhD.

Giacomo, 1976

A professional educator with a social services cooperative based outside Milan, at the time of the study, Giacomo had 15 years' experience as deputy coordinator and educator at a day care centre for persons with disability. He held an MA in Education from the University of Milano-Bicocca.

Guido, 1973

A professional educator working with young adults with psychiatric disorders outside Milan since 2014, Guido had begun to practice as an educator in 2008 in a paediatric neuropsychiatry rehabilitation centre where he worked with children who had been diagnosed with autism. Between 2001 and 2008, he had pursued different careers as a technical support specialist in the Netherlands, IT administrator and teacher, and prior to that had been employed in different sectors. He held a BA in Education from the University of Milano-Bicocca.

Beatrice, 1970

Partner, project director and coordinator since 2007 at a social cooperative offering socio-educational services to minors, persons with disabilities, the elderly and adults outside Milan, Beatrice held an MA in Education from the University of Milano-Bicocca and had extensive experience of working as an educator and a coordinator in a range of different contexts.

Raffaella, 1967

Project director, coordinator and educator with a social services cooperative based outside Milan since 2008, Raffaella was responsible for developing local educational programmes

targeting women, migrants, persons with disabilities, and other minorities. She conducted reading and writing workshops and was trained in expressive techniques. She was a graduate of the former four-year degree course in Education, which she had completed at the University of Milano-Bicocca.

Atena, 1966

A teacher since 1988 at a nursery school outside Milan, where she also taught English as a second language using a narrative approach, Atena had recently completed an MA in Education at the University of Milano-Bicocca.

Mariagrazia, 1963

A PhD student at the University of Milano-Bicocca with an interest in educational theory and research, Mariagrazia had experience of project design and coordination in the mental health and healthcare sectors, as well as of intercultural counselling. Prior to that, she had worked as a sales and administration manager in multinational pharmaceutical and manufacturing companies for 20 years. She held an MA in Education from the University of Milano-Bicocca.

Elsa, 1955

A teacher since 1973, Elsa had taught in primary schools, a teacher training college and vocational schools in the Milan area. She had also worked as a consultant and project coordinator for social co-operatives, and had been collaborating since 1999 with the Department of Human Sciences and Education at the University of Milano-Bicocca, where she completed her doctorate during the research.

## **1) First step: Chaos**

### *Activities*

The group first met in January 2015 in a seminar room equipped with a large table and chairs. Francesco and I introduced the theoretical framework and the methodological and ethical principles that would guide us throughout the inquiry process. We proposed devoting the first session to working on the ‘roots’ – that is to say, the myths each of us hold in relation to the origins – of our relationship with knowing, with a view to introducing ourselves to one another while also beginning to address the research question.



Fig. 9 Creative writing in the seminar room, Bicocca, 16/01/2015.

### *Final Conversation*

Overall, the session raised questions about the co-operative inquiry method and the respective roles of facilitators and participants. Stories were told about how participants had related to knowledge at school and during higher education. Auto/biographically, my own contributions to the final conversation now reveal to me that I was anxious about keeping time and about applying the methodology without deforming it. Towards the end, feeling overcome by stories of knowing that seemed to be ‘all over the place’, I asked participants what deliberate action (Formenti, 2009), if any, they might undertake as a result of the session. The group expressed confusion, as reflected in the comments of Giacomo and Federico below:

Giacomo: I am coming out of this day with a lot of confusion ... this complexity is destabilizing me a bit, in the sense of wanting to understand where we are going to end up. ... I think I will hang the picture [of roots] on the door of my locker in the changing room [at work]... wondering to myself, among the clothes hanging out to dry... when I put on the residents' laundry, what that has got to do with my professional knowing, I mean, knowing how to do the laundry.

Gaia: The materiality of formation.

Giacomo: Exactly. I think that is where my profession comes in to play ... I think this is one of the most heterogeneous groups and in this sense one of the richest groups that I have ever joined. So, for me it is a bit of a struggle to enter, to let go [inaudible] that I knew better. ...

Francesco: We'll try to understand this together.

Federico: I would like to go back to the washing machine mentioned by Giacomo. The confusion of the washing machine and the clothes that are put inside, the heterogeneity of

the group, which has been reshaping itself through many different discourses, leaves me not so much with deliberate action [to be undertaken] ... but with a perspective on the different styles with which we refer to our knowing ... I am inclined to be cautious ...

Recorded final conversation, Bicocca, 16/01/2015.

I identify this moment as the first ‘embarrassment’ (Sclavi, 2003), in which my expectations clashed with what the group was contributing. The **washing machine** works as a key metaphor for this chaos: the group was caught up in a mysterious technical process (methodology) that was mixing up their individual identities by turning things upside-down (group dynamics and the subversion of power inherent in co-operative inquiry)... would they ultimately be washed away from some of their previously held assumptions?

In response, my co-facilitator clarified the research framework to the group, adopting an assertive tone that I felt was more in keeping with (a certain kind of) training course than what I imagined our co-operative endeavour could/should be like. On the research scene that was taking shape, I observed the ongoing negotiation of the relationship between facilitators and participants, which still remained to be defined, while the following extracts from the final conversation illustrate some strategies of knowing that were being adopted. Federico was often a critical voice, and my ‘Freudian slip’ (in using two contradictory terms as synonymous) was indicative of my own struggle and confusion at that point in time:

- joking about difficulties,

Federico: I don’t know if the active researcher exists but I like [the idea] [laughs] [group laughs], I don’t know if [he/she] could be called a ‘co-operative researcher’ or what.

Francesco: With an ‘h’<sup>98</sup> [group laughs].

Federico: Yes.

Francesco: Before *and* after! Like co-operative hhhhhh researcher.

- expressing disagreement with the facilitation,

Federico: I wanted to reply to what you were saying, Francesco, about the roots. Personally, I think it was a bit complex ...

Gaia: ... Maybe approaching this construct [of the professional self] together as a group, while keeping this relationship [knowing-self] at the centre, can help us to make it a richer object of knowledge: at the personal and the group levels, at different times of life and ... historical periods, from our grandparents’ stories to how we live today. All these levels come together [collimano, in Italian], collide together [collidono, in Italian] to form an image with multiple levels ...

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<sup>98</sup> To defuse the tension that was building up, Francesco joked here about his own habit of inappropriately aspirating English words, which the group had been finding comical.

Federico: It seems a very strong hypothesis to see our professional selves as related to our roots of knowing, and with a biographical dimension, a strong hypothesis that we took a bit for granted today.

- becoming a group and talking to each other (as well as about the facilitators),

Elsa: I think that the strength of a group is that you influence one other, like a virtuous cycle; you [Federico] are saying this thing now, but I was assuming that this would work, I didn't doubt it.

Federico: This thing...

Elsa: About the strong hypothesis of the triangle [autobiography-knowing-profession] because I had that sort of trust, as you say, that the facilitators were proposing something to us that would succeed;<sup>99</sup>

- asking for support and more clarity from the facilitation,

Giacomo: At this point I need to ask a naïve question. What is the object of the research that we are here to do? At this point, in the end, I feel like I want to reformulate it.

Gaia: Yes.

Giacomo: ... Do we have to put the two things together? Because it is true that we were taking this a bit for granted.

The formative effect of the research was implied in Elsa's final comment, which we left unanswered: 'Yes. I will throw out the big question. Is it desirable that I change my frameworks [of reference] to adopt new ones at the end of this research activity? ... This happens if one hangs in there and desires, the famous desire'. I was struck by how accurately the complexity of individual motivations for joining the research, desires to know and fears of knowing, and the circular relationship between dispositive and formation had been revealed.

#### *Report by Elsa*

Over the following weeks, Elsa wrote a report of the session. Arriving late she had observed the work atmosphere and found it light ('lightness', 'tranquil', 'minimal'), particularly during the exercise of extracting a poem from a longer text with the help of a partner (Cupane, 2009):

... I listen to the discourses and a loosening phase begins which allows me to make associations with the choices [of words] and narratives that I am listening to.

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<sup>99</sup> Elsa literally says 'that would lead us to the harbour' in Italian, an apt metaphor for a safe journey of learning guided by the facilitators.

... I find out that someone else was attracted to a completely different version of the image, I would call this the lightness of diversity.

Elsa, report on the first session, 06/02/2015.

I link this metaphor of **lightness** with Federico's washing machine image: the challenge of chaos now seemed to have been mitigated by the heterogeneity of the group and the openness of the conversation; this stood in favourable contrast with participants' stories of schooling in which knowledge had been evaluated according to an imposed standard.

At the second session, each participant was given a printed copy of Elsa's report and asked to underline the sentences that most struck them. These sentences described the communicative context and some of its ethical, relational, and epistemological aspects. What Elsa described as a 'light style' was associated with: activity, facilitation, the setting, listening, free association, diversity, focus, and working together for a full day.

When I open the door, I find what I am expecting, everyone is working ...

Their introduction and way of explaining guided our work.

Francesco:<sup>100</sup> "Constraints that are not constraints but possibilities, the constraint of possibility".

Gaia: "Care that the group will take of whatever happens".

... men and women sitting in a circle, of different ages and from different lives but we are here, ... I listen to the discourses and a phase of loosening begins that allows me to make associations with the choices and narratives that I am listening to.

... lightness of diversity.

We laugh and we joke but not too much, the atmosphere does not need to be lightened, there is focus and calm.

At the end, it is dark, we leave in small groups and we are already in the world.

I close my notebook without having marked out any spaces.

Fragments chosen by participants from Elsa's report on the first session, 06/02/2015.

The issue of having sufficient time to assimilate experience and reflect came even more to the forefront in the construction of the co-operative research space that took place during the second session.

## 2) Second step: Positioning

### *Activities*

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<sup>100</sup> The author of the report mentioned Francesco and me by name and quoted things that we had said, thereby constructing facilitator/formateur personae for us in her text.



As Federico would later write in his report, the group met in the studio ‘with smiles of complicity’. The studio is a large room with a soft floor and a wall mirror used for the BA in Education programme’s permanent Theatre Laboratory run by Francesco and a dancer colleague, as well as for other classes and seminars. This was a different physical and symbolic space within the university building that could be moulded by us because it was ‘empty’ – but that at the same time was associated with the theatre workshop, for some. During this session, we worked on participants’ learning biographies, beginning by inviting them to aesthetically represent their individual ‘rivers of learning’.



Fig. 10 Drawing in the studio, Bicocca, 13/02/2015.



Fig. 11 Composition in the studio, Bicocca, 13/02/2015.

### *Final Conversation*

The conversation opened with comments about the composition activity that had served to reinforce the group, and for some evoked working as a team, which sometimes involved adapting to the others by ‘leaving out’ one’s own knowledge and self. Some made critical observations about the *how* of our research, starting from Nadia’s comment on time. This caused embarrassment (Sclavi, 2003) between the group and me, given that I had prepared the programme with great epistemological care; yet aesthetic knowledge needed more time. Was I pushing them too hard?

Nadia: I’ve realized that I’m really struggling to pay attention to what is happening. We’ve been through many symbolic forms, many languages, and maybe in this moment ... I feel that perhaps I might need more time. ... It could be my own exhaustion today. I attribute it to the work.

Gaia: An interesting exhaustion, um.

Federico: I agree with Nadia's comment, in the sense that as I listened, I felt the need for the discussion to carry on ... which due to time constraints was...

Alberto: Cut.

Federico: Cut yes [group laughs]. ... I had the perception ... of a form of knowledge based on small moments of emotion. Some defined it as emotion and others as ... affective experience, creativity. ... Creating an opening onto something affectively dense ... that let us touch something, and then we brought this back to our current existence, to our professional identity. This transition was quite artistic, quite creative in quality.

Recorded final conversation, Bicocca, 13/02/2015.

After Federico's comment, I returned to the issue of time, and admitted that, in my role as researcher, I was finding it difficult to reconcile my desire to use many creative languages in the research process and with the need to allot enough time to do things properly. Yet I spoke in the third person as though I was scared to expose my 'true self' (Winnicott, 1965).

Gaia: [long pause] Do you think that [Nadia's] reflection on time is interesting?

Nadia: Yes, thinking about where I was going with my comment, it was because I attribute a lot of value to what we did today. ...

Gaia: ... in relation to facilitating research in a group and operations of cutting to make room and your reflection about time, um, it's difficult not to plan to do too much, Francesco and I are curious to explore many languages and allow space for other ways of doing research. But knowing that time is needed to do things.

Recorded final conversation, Bicocca, 13/02/2015.

It seemed that the group and myself were similarly struggling to understand how aesthetic knowledge (related for Heron to 'imaginal patterns as experienced in graphic, plastic, moving, musical and verbal art-forms', 1996, p. 33) might become partly accessible in words. Therefore, I proposed basing the last part of the conversation on Federico's critical question about the relationship between narrative and experiential knowledge via the aesthetic bridge:

Gaia: Federico, would you like to ask your question again?

Federico: OK. ... what kind of connection is there between different or maybe similar kinds of knowledge, that is on the one hand ... biography, writing, narrative, and on the other terms that were at the centre of the discussion, such as emotion, affectivity, corporeality, materiality. ... Are the connections that strong?

Recorded final conversation, Bicocca, 13/02/2015.

At this point, Guido offered me the guiding metaphor of ‘space’ which has helped me to conceptualize what was happening in the second research session, a physical and temporal space in which a specific kind of communication occurred that involved balancing speaking and listening with the help of ad hoc tools. I think of it as a ‘holding’ space (Winnicott, 1971) that was ‘marked out’ from other professional and personal times, and the construction of which included the people in it. Guido felt that it had enabled him to gain insights, as he explained in his own words:

Guido: I think for me the place matters, the fact of cutting out a space here today to um to try to say some things, to listen to other things, to do, to work with some tools, some resources ... when a metaphor is suggested, for me, the key thing is to stay with it ... I keep saying that the container works well on me, that is, this room with all these people inside it, and everything.

Francesco: What does this shape [the container] work on?

Guido: It works... on fishing out some peculiarities of knowledge, of my relationship with knowledge last time, and this time also some purely biographical issues, so to speak, because um I don’t know, Atena had my CV in her hands and from the CV she extracted some words ... to which she gave new warmth [smiles] because in two sentences I really recognized myself ... I had the impression that I had gained insights into really important questions that had concerned me in the past, in the course of my journey.

Recorded final conversation, Bicocca, 13/02/2015.

The creative writing of a short story based on his CV represented an opportunity for Guido to bring an aesthetic approach to bear on his profession, in response to the methodological and epistemological dilemma posed by Federico. The change of narrator disrupted the narrative of the CV, introducing other viewpoints and generating learning.

Participants began to position themselves in relation to the epistemological dilemmas defining their research space and ‘how’ they could work as researchers; this is exemplified in the conversation between Nadia and Federico, in which the former draws on her professional knowledge of aesthetic and bodily languages. A relational space was being built too, as other questions were being asked between the lines: ‘Who am I for you, who are you for me?’ (Formenti, 2014, unpublished).

Nadia: With regard to what you were saying Federico, so you hypothesize that there is a value in aesthetic knowledge that is not necessarily narrative? ...

Federico: Yes. Somehow yes ...

Nadia: But this does not mean that it is not personal ... you were saying that the personal level is not necessarily related to the narrative, you were saying this.

Federico: No. I am saying ... I think that the kind of knowledge that we are enacting is not narrative, because I presume we don't have a ready-made biography but that we tell it differently each time, with some continuities.

Recorded final conversation, Bicocca, 13/02/2015.

Why do we tell our story differently at different times? Is there only one story, or are there psychosomatic experiences that generate an emergent narrative self? The group was asking the big questions of narrative research, which scared and excited me. I had no idea where we might end up and no answers.

This time I had tried to listen more carefully to what the participants said instead of being rigid and 'performing'. But towards the end, when we were running late, I became anxious again and repeatedly asked that we draw the session to a close. But the participants took as much time as they wanted, asking for clarification from one another, and telling more stories. Was the group teaching us and learning to play with facilitating roles within the co-operative space?

#### *Report by Federico*

Federico's report was written in an ironical tone in part ('sacred bond: river of knowledge', 'pseudo-reflective discussion', 'mysterious defining object'), and expressed a radical critique of the project. He raised criticisms of several different aspects of the research work, some of which spoke to me of questions of power, ways of knowing, and language (all extracts are from his report written on 06/02/2015):

- the validity of representation and conversation as a strategy for changing one's perspective and becoming reflexive about experience,

So is it all a question of listening to – mixed up by other mouths – words, names, objects that give life to contextual memories, re-experienced and thus re-cognized? ... Is this narrative aesthetic fictive experience?

- the hypothesis that learning biographies could be used to research lived lives,

I get all tangled up in search of handholds and possible categorizations. What process of knowing does the learning biography use? ... What model of learning is related to it? ... Is there any antecedence to language?;

- the lack of a shared methodology and shared research hypothesis,

The group lacks a clear awareness of the structure of the session and a definition of its aims.

Federico was an ironical critical voice within the group who seemed to say: ‘Ha ha, I don’t believe you’. I wondered if his critical stance also had to do with his current relationship with knowing as a doctoral student who was researching narrative and perhaps struggling like me to produce ‘valid’ findings. His critical remarks worked at the *meso* level to bring to the fore important distinctions that helped the group to position itself vis-à-vis the research and the facilitators, circularly informing the space. However, the challenge he threw down to us as facilitators caused us some embarrassment, and I remember sitting in a café reading the report with Francesco, and thinking that we were in trouble. I particularly felt that I needed to allow the group to help us progress the research by adopting a different position within the group. To a certain extent, Federico’s questions were also mine, although I had not yet realized this. Following this session, Francesco and I came up with the idea of introducing different tools to help pin down the research question, and to take more time to do this.

### 3) Third step: Individuation

#### *Activities*

The metaphor of knowledge cards by Fabbri and Munari (2010) aroused great curiosity among the participants’ and I tried to interact more with the group by pointing out connections among the cards they had chosen. The *assemblage* of participants’ metaphors of knowledge and the creative writing exercise slowed down time, as occurs in physical play (Winnicott, 1971) and craftwork. The photo on the left below illustrates aspects of bodily mirroring and grouping. The right-hand image shows the symbolic use of the circle, with a circle of chairs (to the back, where cards were picked) and a circular area of object making. Constructing individual representations of knowing was key to giving substance to each unique epistemology, individuating participants as subjects and professionals.



Fig. 12 Choosing metaphor of knowledge cards, Bicocca, 10/03/2015.



Fig. 13 Producing the *assemblages*, Bicocca, 10/03/2015.

### *Final Conversation*

The participants now drew on their individual stores of disciplinary knowledge, both lifelong and lifewide:<sup>101</sup> Alberto's as a qualified ethnographer, Beatrice's as a service coordinator, Giacomo's as an educator, Mariagrazia's as a former manager, Guido's as an amateur musician, and so on. An example is a story told by Mariagrazia about learning a procedural strategy while working in the import-export business, and Giacomo's reply to her.

Gaia: To understand more clearly, may I ask you what you did?

Mariagrazia: I worked for an American multinational in the import-export sector ... so you had to know certain communication techniques, a series of things, but also at the operational level to be able to use a particular software.

Giacomo: The practice.

Mariagrazia: It was connected, because it mattered to how you came across in your relationship with the client, the supplier and so on. It was the knowledge of how that process functioned ... You had to know all the customs procedures ...

Giacomo: Many social services are worse than Customs [smiles] [group laughs], I don't know how different it is to what happened there.

Recorded final conversation, Bicocca, 10/03/2015.

I was learning to use aesthetic tools (in this case, the metaphor of knowledge cards) to suggest connections and dig deeper within the conversation. This seemed to facilitate participants' processes of individuation. For example, Mariagrazia changed her story to integrate her previous and current knowledge strategies, appearing to also acquire a sense of self-integration (Winnicott, 1965).

Gaia: Yes. While you were speaking, I was looking at your cards. The Web one has elements that might be seen in light of what you were saying now, it is both, I don't know, it seems to me that this card could be interesting in terms of drawing a link between your previous and your present life as a knowing subject.

Mariagrazia: Yes. Also because ... why did I manage to do all that I did [on my PhD] on time and everything? Because I worked on my objectives with the same mentality as in the past, and so for me it is natural, you know.

Francesco: Speaking of relationships with knowing!

Mariagrazia: So, I characterize it [my past experience], well, when I speak about it I characterize it in very positive ways, from my point of view.

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<sup>101</sup> In the sense of knowledge that extended synchronically to non-professional areas of group members' lives as well as chronologically.

In this conversation, participants used their peculiar positions and professional experience to address prejudices about knowing and the self in education. For example, senior and junior educators discussed the tendency, in their work, to see everything as a function of the encounter with the other.

Alberto: What Mariagrazia said tells us a lot about our profession because her knowledge, for example, was applied ... Ours is knowledge based on action and so we cannot deploy the same strategy. ...

Giacomo: But at the same time, educational knowledge does not start from scratch each time, because otherwise I would run the risk of saying, I have undergone some experiences but because I cannot [repeat them], well, it seems, um, that we have to keep on starting over. But I don't think you are saying that, are you?

Alberto: No, we are not always at Level 0, no. Maybe at Level 0 but another step onwards along an imaginary spiralling path.

These examples also demonstrate that the group was learning to pursue ideas, weave discourses, and evaluate hypotheses together. Towards the end of the conversation, Francesco's different way of facilitating (informed by the clinical-educational approach mentioned in Chapter Four and attentive to the latent factors potentially at work in a given scenario) became apparent once more when he adopted an argumentative style, reformulating and reframing thoughts, and prompting the group to carry forward his critical train of reflection:

Francesco: We might even retrieve that opaque element that Anna was contributing earlier. There is something that needs to disappear, so that this dimension of knowing [can appear], [a dimension] which is not so implicit, but that we carry inside or behind us or that we put up front when we meet the other in the situations in which we find ourselves. There is something that needs to disappear so that we can encounter... what? The knowing inherent in the experience of the encounter with the other maybe, perhaps this is the Level 0 that Alberto referred to, can we formulate this hypothesis? ... So, what must disappear?

Given that the group did not oppose this style, I began to ask myself what sort of expectations the participants had about receiving *formation* and what imagination of 'expert' knowledge was circulating among them.

*Report by Beatrice*

Beatrice's report expressed her own theoretical position and her intellectual need for theoretical clarity. I think that she also spoke for the group in that she strove to clarify and 'flesh out' the group's work at both the epistemological and methodological levels.

She announced that she wished to follow the 'knowledgeable school of Laura Formenti' by explicitly stating her own theoretical perspective as advocated by systemic epistemological approaches. She had asked the other members of the group, whom she named one by one, to send her individual contributions so that she could give them voice more respectfully. She wrote that Elsa and Nadia left the group after the second session, providing a complete narrative of events. Beatrice gave detailed descriptions of the activities and tools used, as though depositing for the benefit of the group the methodological knowledge that they had acquired through participating in the research. She offered a careful account of the group's conversations and her efforts seemed to be appreciated, given the key sentences chosen by the participants.

These are our stories. This is becoming our story;

Our way of knowing is unique. What is its shape?;

This workshop, the educational work, are a bit like the workshop of a craftsman, giving substance;

Knowledge takes on a structure: it composes symbol (lightness) and language (body);

The questions that inhabit and animate each of us are serious, wise, and based on evidence that I do not know whether the majority of people view as 'scientific', but which is certainly based on intelligence, curiosity, experience, study, reflexivity, communication...

Fragments chosen by participants from Beatrice's report on the first session, 10/04/2015.

Beatrice's question about the scientific value of the co-operative inquiry represented a *meso*-level dilemma for the group: 'Maybe the knowledge that we can produce co-operatively is not scientific in a traditional sense, so what knowledge are we producing together here?' The issue of the 'solidity' of knowledge was raised after the experience of working with evocative objects, which had led the group towards more idiosyncratic, unsayable, affective, felt and therefore 'unscientific' (from a traditional perspective) dimensions of knowing. Beatrice quoted the poet Rainer Maria Rilke at the end of her report in support of striving to remain open to the quest ('try to love *the questions themselves* like locked rooms [...]', Rilke, 1929, p. 17). Yet the participants seemed to be expressing a concern, together with Beatrice, that the research work and educational work underway needed to become more visible, and that their knowledge needed to be named and communicated with some degree of scientific authority.



#### **4) Fourth step: Desire**

##### *Initial Conversation*

After reading Beatrice's report, the group had a short conversation. Beatrice asked us to be more explicit.

Beatrice: ... my most recent significant experience has been writing my thesis ... I had to pose some issues to myself in relation to the methodological rigour with which I was addressing my questions ... This final part is a step that we can take together, because you [Gaia and Francesco] as researchers have it more in mind, maybe you quote authors etc., but us [smiles]: Whoopie! We can go out of here and say the first thing that comes into our heads. But then 'using' this knowledge is a responsibility ...

Francesco: How would you name this need, the need to? ...

Beatrice: ... Explicate the method, let's start by explicating the method.

Recorded initial conversation, Bicocca, 10/04/2015.

Other participants replied by declaring their expectations about the research and its scientific value. Professionals working in the social services said that they wanted to systematize the knowledge acquired; Atena, in contrast, said that in schools reflexivity was rare.

Raffaella: ... The thoughts that I have about this project concern systematization because I am afraid of losing them [the ideas] ... I want to keep them, I want to put them aside for a rainy day ['store them in the farmhouse' in Italian] because I am scared that it might run away ...

Atena: I am not worried because I feel the care on the part of the facilitators and this gives me, well, creating these conditions that you have created has put me, but I think has put everyone in a condition of comfort, in which experience speaks for itself. I have no other opportunities in my professional and personal life to speak about my experience. I have no opportunities to reflect on my work ... This [reflecting] means producing material, allowing something symbolic to come out which in the materiality of the everyday is lost at times.

Recorded initial conversation, Bicocca, 10/04/2015.

Atena's comment flags an issue for co-operative epistemology (Heron, 1996), namely the risk of idealizing participants' ability to think collectively as a group of subjects-researchers (Reason, 1988). This also became part of my own self-discovery: specifically, prior to engaging in the cooperative enquiry I had idealized certain ideas and theorists, while through actually living and working with them, I was able to integrate them into my overall perspective while also coming to view them less idealistically.

Complaints about the ‘weakness’ of educational, as compared to medical and psychiatric, knowledge, and the need for an objective language to ‘back up one’s point of view’ in work situations led to an emblematic moment of dilemma for the group, and for us as facilitators. How could we respond to a request for training (in the sense here of transmission of contents) on the part of our participants in a context of (co-operative) research? I rounded out Atena’s comment about the interpretative nature of all professional knowledge by introducing the arguments of complexity theory. My co-facilitator guided the group out of embarrassment and frustration by offering a clinical-reflexive perspective: more precisely, by suggesting that formative data emerge from reflection on experience, and that specific tools may be used to achieve this. Our work on/with biographical narratives would construct the language that the participants required to act mindfully from a position of greater contact with their own learning stories, if not from a ‘scientific’ standpoint.

The group’s increasingly ‘playful’ (vital, in the sense of Winnicott, 1971) participation in the inquiry process suggested that the cooperative/biographical approach was working for this group, at this time. Yet the issue of scientific knowledge raised the inevitable question of authority in co-operative inquiry, or what Charlot (1997) refers to as the hierarchical organization of society as a function of knowledge relations.

### *Activities*

An interesting twist occurred when Francesco and I read aloud to the group the short story by J.L. Borges, *Circular Ruins* (see Appendix n. 5). This is the tale of a mysterious magician’s enterprise to create and give life to a human being, first by reasoning/educating and then by dreaming/desiring the other starting from the heart, flesh and bones. When he came to read the part about the beating heart, Francesco had to stop, as he felt emotional about his mentor who was ill at the time. I read his part of the text as well as my own. This episode signalled another kind of embarrassment, caused by the affective quality of our relationship with knowing, and of our relationships with significant others whom we view as esteemed and authoritative guides to knowing.

This step revealed to me another level of circularity of the collective mind, which made it possible for my ‘expert’ co-facilitator and myself to exchange roles for the first time and to offer complementary responses to the group and to each other.<sup>102</sup>

We invited the participants to read the text individually and share their observations in the context of the subsequent conversation. The space of the entire room was used to carry out the drawing and writing activities (see the photo on the left below), and this led into the final

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<sup>102</sup> Yet the negotiation between Francesco and myself of our reciprocal positions of knowing was still problematic, and this story is the focus of the final chapter in the dissertation.

conversation during which the participants, seated in a circle, orally presented their artwork and stories to the group.



Fig. 14 Drawing the portrait of the mentor, Bicocca, 10/04/2015.



Fig. 15 Presentation of drawings and final conversation, Bicocca, 10/04/2015.

### *Final Conversation*

The episodes described in the writing exercise unveiled complex desires in participants' relationship with knowing and the other (and the authoritativeness of the other's knowing). The final conversation on mentors was a dance of difficult stories that concerned feedback, trust, and recognition, and brought 'authentic' autobiographical substance to the research (Formenti, 2008). This validated our methodological decision to delay asking participants to write an autobiographical episode until this point in the process, when group dynamics had stabilized and some order had been brought into the initial chaos.

### *Report by Giacomo*

Giacomo wrote a fluid text with reflections on the research methodology, the project activities, the stories generated, and his own autobiographical resonances. The title 'Views from above, tongues of fire' was as evocative as Borges's *Circular ruins*, condensing and drawing together the various dimensions in the vision of knowing now held by the group: the body in which emotions are felt, the 'languages' spoken (professional, aesthetic, poetic etc.), and the mysterious element symbolised by the sacred fire in Borges's short story.

Giacomo's etymological insert was the first 'object' to appear inside a report.

## Mentore

**méntore** = *gr.* MENTOR [parallelo al *lat.* mōnitor] che propr. vale *consigliere*, dallo stesso ceppo di MĒNYŌ = *lat.* MŌNEO *mostro, indico*, e tiene alla *rad.* MAN- *pensare, conoscere, sapere*, che è nel *sscr.* MA-N-YĒ *penso, MĀNAS intelletto ecc.* (v. *Monito*).

Personaggio, al quale nel poema di Omero, l'Odissea, Ulisse affidò la cura della sua casa e sotto le cui sembianze Atēna (ossia Minerva) accompagnò Telemaco, figlio di Ulisse, nel suo viaggio a Pilos; onde poi questo nome è divenuto sinonimo di Aio, Guida, specialmente dopo la rinomanza universalmente attinta dall'opera di Fénelon dove Mentore sostiene sì degnamente la sua parte.

Fig. 16 Etymology of the word 'mentore', in Giacomo's report on the fourth session, 06/05/2015.

The following extracts chosen by the participants from Giacomo's report suggested that the group endorsed his systematization of the research work to date, and had become more comfortable with the research process (report written on 06/05/2015):

- there was a greater sense of curiosity,
  - The group allowed a shared sense of responsibility for the research path and research object to emerge;
  - Knowing here means living and attributing meaning to our experience as it presents itself to us. In its biographical, personal, weak, and complex aspects;
  - Questions that remained open await us...;
- the precariousness of the condition of being involved in research could now be talked about,
  - Sensations of having to do with slippery and profound themes, that connect, provoke, unearth;
  - Under what conditions may scientific knowledge be justified? What counts as a piece of "formative" data? What does it mean to "think human things"?
- the interpretative method was based on care,
  - Care for the question. The research question on the relationship between knowing and professional self, initially considered as a given object to be analysed, gradually became integrated into the movements of the group;

Care for the materials. We spoke about scientific rigour in how the materials produced during and emerging from the sessions are collected and stored;

Care for the group. The group dimension ... as a condition required for the research process to be authentic: the group facilitates staying with the complexity of the various perspectives ... it tests on itself a shared language that generates and conveys meanings;

- co-operative research demanded a continuous balancing act between the subjectivity of experience and the inter-subjectivity of understanding – possibly entailing the suppression of objective knowledge,

But what difficulty does this aspect imply? That of a recursive quality within the group, which is “entangled in the question” and is therefore always searching for a balance between an excess of subjectivity and “anxiousness” to generalize one’s own knowing.

During the conversation on the report Alberto invented the expression ‘**spiralitose cycle**’ to speak of the circularity of the collective mind, as it spirals between subjective and inter-subjective dimensions.

Alberto: ‘Excess of subjectivity and “anxiousness” (need) to generalize one’s own knowing’. And this is kind of, the fuel that makes the group go on. I recognize the subjectivity that may or may not then melt into something else that makes the group go on to another cognitive level of reflection. But there is also this um recursive loop, which makes that something then comes back to the individual, in this... “spiralitose” cycle.

Recorded conversation while participants chose fragments in the report by Giacomo, 09/05/2015.

## **5) Fifth step: ‘Playing’**

### *Activities*

In May, the group met for an intensive weekend in a large room with a parquet floor overlooking the garden of the old Villa di Breme Forno, a campus building used for academic seminars and conferences. The day was sunny and warm.



Fig. 17 Oral narrative exercise in Villa Forno, Bicocca, 09/05/2015. Fig. 18 Role-play in Villa Forno, Bicocca, 10/05/2015.

The weekend was designed to allow the group to experience and become reflexive about the presence of the body in relational workplace settings. During the final conversation on the Sunday, Guido and Anna commented that re-telling stories in different forms (role-play and *mise en scène*) and swapping them backwards and forwards between the two subgroups had been an effective means of learning through interaction; it seemed to me that aesthetic and performative languages had now found their place in our collective narrative practice.

Guido: I am very struck ... by the discourse of our group, I mean, how the group is functioning. The harmony that there was in this new form of the two groups: that seems to me to be quite evident in both groups. The intersections ... all these intersections and I don't know, I feel like saying I feel part of quite a strong group, in the sense of the potential of the group [smiles].

Anna: I think we carried out many activities that allowed this [allowed us to become a strong group], specifically the idea of preparing a *mise en scène* of a work-related episode supplied by one of the other group and which had already been role-played by the other group, made it possible to interact. So yes, absolutely yes.

Recorded final conversation, Bicocca, 10/05/2015.

However, my experience of the weekend was not so idyllic. I felt like an outsider to the group at times, and silenced in relation to my colleague Francesco, an aspect that I discuss auto/biographically further on.

The diaries kept by Alberto, on Saturday, and Anna, on Sunday, are creative texts that bring together different genres of autobiography to describe personal and professional, imagined and real worlds.

### *Report by Alberto*

The report is introduced by a long autobiographical narrative of a journey made by Alberto to visit his family in the South of Italy. His story of migration was elicited by the evocative use (Bollas, 2009) of the map of Italy outlined on the floor, inside of which participants walked about and stopped to tell where their learning biographies had literally ‘taken place’. Alberto wrote a part of his report while on a visit to his family in the mountains near Naples. During the train journey, memories of his university years ‘up North’ in Bologna came back to him, and in narrating this he linked his personal story to the macro socio-historical context:

As I cross Bologna station, I fleetingly recollect my first years at university there, but now (given the numerous times that I have travelled up and down “the boot” [Italy] in the years since Bologna), my memory settles on the many train journeys that I have made to run away from home and/or go back there. Only eight years ago, the Intercity train service (I preferred the night one because it only cost 10 euro) entailed an eight-hour journey from Bologna to Napoli, countless stops, a continuous turnover of people and stories ... Two large suitcases emanated jubilant smells; at some point during the journey the fragments of a story that had begun far back took shape in the present: the woman was going to see (and to feed) her son who had recently moved “up North”.

Alberto, report on the fifth session, 28/05/2015.

The metaphors used throughout the text were spatial (home-mother, mountain-mentor). Further on the report, Alberto used another spatial metaphor that seemed particularly evocative of the cooperative inquiry group: ‘**bacino**’, which in Italian means both basin and pelvis. The group has become like a centre of balance and motion, and a protected space where multiple resources can merge chaotically. You immerse in the basin to ‘play’, says Alberto, and emerge afterwards; a difficult experience, yet vital.

Dozens of paths, over the past several months, have decided to merge in this “basin”, which though delimited by recognized and shared boundaries, is internally criss-crossed by continuously shifting currents: bumps, moments of apnoea, immersions and emersions in discourses and practices which each of us digest in our own way, before taking up our path once more, possibly reinvigorated, challenged, stimulated, transformed. Permeability is one of the conditions that allow learning and transformation: letting in and letting out, like the breathing movement that nature has imposed on us as condition for life, sometimes for survival.

Alberto, report on the fifth session, 28/05/2015.

### *Report by Anna*

Anna's was the last report written for the group. Her writing was poetic in style with ample use of short rhythmic sentences and versification.

First steps, first crumbs.

It is Sunday morning: sleep, yawns, sun, greetings, smiles, serenity.

The room recognizes us, welcomes us: we are the same people as yesterday, we left our smells and our reflections here yesterday. And from these we start again.

Anna, report on the fifth session, 31/05/2015.

Anna's rhetorical strategy was to connect fragments of thought by means of an overarching metaphor: **bread** is crumbled and dropped piece by piece to mark out the path the group has followed up to now. This evoked for me the nurture that the group produced, a nourishing, simple, ancient, somehow 'basic' reflexive knowing that was very far from the 'scientific' knowledge that had seemed necessary to validate our inquiry during our initial disorientation.

It's about crumbling some bread on a road that is now downhill, so as to be able to travel back over it, but now viewing it with the eyes of one who has already walked over these stones.

Anna, report on the fifth session, 31/05/2015.

The most frequently underlined fragments in the report concerned the professional's passion for learning. This spoke to me about my own burning passion for knowledge, my significant others, my desire for self, and my 'hiding and performing' within roles.

... the rhyming couplet ['kissed rhyme' in Italian] of profession and passion, so blended together as to be confused sometimes. And towards whom is this passion directed? Whose need of experience-knowledge does this passion satisfy?;

Fragment chosen by participants in Anna's report on the fifth session, Bicocca, 06/06/2015.

Anna emailed her report, attaching a piece of jazz by pianist Ezio Bosso: *Speed Limit. A night ride*. The group's need for a 'scientific' language had given way to a creative playing with cultural objects that interrogate the interplay between subjective and objective knowing.

### **6) Final session and follow-up**

At the final session, the participants brought a reflexive approach to bear on the entire research process and attempted to construct three local theories, in three small groups, in answer to the research question. My co-facilitator and I participated by asking for clarification



and I felt more part of the conversation this time. A ‘group mind’ emerged that worked actively on the research question, by examining in depth, questioning, challenging, changing, and enriching all previous understandings. At the follow-up stage, this sense of a collective mind was conveyed to me by the way in which Beatrice, during an initial conversation, proposed that we use the session to reflect on what had changed in participants’ professional self-perceptions, as an outcome of taking part in the co-operative inquiry. It was now possible for us all to think together as a *we* and to collectively propose research actions.

### **Summary**

As we have seen, conducting research in an ad hoc co-operative setting allowed the group to develop a shared and satisfying way of languaging and co-ordinating its research activity. The emergence of this ‘collective mind’ was marked by significant metaphors for aspects of co-operative knowing (washing machine/chaos, lightness/conviviality, space/holding setting, ‘spiralitose’ cycle/subjective-intersubjective, basin/embodied playing, bread/nurture); as well as by crises that propelled the group system towards new levels of organization, in constructivist terms (Formenti, 1998; Maturana, 1990). Changes in methodology also had a formative effect on me, and I try to name what I learned.

### *Embarrassments*

I synthesized ironically and hypothetically with a participant’s critical comment each of the four main crises through which the group (and the facilitators) constructed new knowledge about their research:

- *What do you want from me?* Confusion perceived in relation to whether the invitation is to receive *formation*<sup>103</sup> or engage in co-operative inquiry (first day);
- *There’s no time!* The demand to spend more time in the body, i.e., on the sensuous and aesthetic components of the research process (second day);
- *I don’t believe you!* Critique of the methodological choices and epistemological underpinnings and claim that the decisions were imposed (report on second day);
- *What’s the scientific authority of this?* Request to appropriate the theoretical assumptions and methodology to validate the quest (fourth day).

### *A highly uncertain practice*

Ultimately, I learnt that co-operative inquiry, which I implemented by following – and adapting – John Heron’s model and the biographical version of it developed by Laura Formenti, is a highly uncertain practice. It emerges from a, partly unconscious, interplay of

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<sup>103</sup> See fn. 25.

relations and needs within the group. It is a practice that brings participants and researchers into a transitional space (Winnicott, 1971), in which they negotiate who they are, and play more mindfully with their knowing. The five steps that I have proposed – Chaos, Positioning, Individuation, Desire, and ‘Playing’ – trace the emergence of a collective level of coordination of thinking and action, which actively engages the inquirers, at conscious and less conscious levels, in negotiating a shared reality. They also imply the transformative emergence of a radically new outlook on professional development, from which learning is not framed in terms of skills, objectives, evaluation, credits, etc., but as processes of change and transition within professional becoming; learning thus entails an initial state of disorientation, followed by an individual process of reorientation, and ultimately, a new perspective from which to act.

This process can indeed reveal desires to know and not to know, to become and not to become who we say we want to become (a professional, a researcher). Such was my own experience in this group and in writing this chapter: I would gain an insight into something and then step away from it. Uncertainty is summed up here in the unfolding of my own relationship with the process that I went through, and with knowing.

The process threw up big questions concerning epistemological truths about co-operation, biography, experience, knowledge and care which were not what they had originally appeared to be from an idealized perspective. Key questions were reformulated under conditions of unknowing, that is to say, of authentic research, which entailed peeling off layers of rigid thinking and allowing ourselves to play with our prejudices. Co-operative inquiry raised critical issues of power-knowledge, creativity, and reciprocal expectations: this is because it is ultimately about the space that we create and occupy, a space of being as much as of knowing (Reason, 1988). It follows that different ways of knowing – body, emotion, imagination – challenge the despotism of reason, allowing embodied knowing to be released.

In this group, especially at the beginning, the negotiation of the role of the facilitators in constructing and holding an ordered space for chaos was crucial. I believe that it was a necessary role, along with dialogue and increasing cooperation with participants in holding this space, albeit from different positions of responsibility. The possibility of playing with power was key to the ‘authenticity’ of the quest (authentic collaboration), together with the ‘playing’ with selves supported by the use of different languages that were also drawn on and experienced by the group – although finding a good enough balance between subjective and objective knowledge remained difficult.<sup>104</sup>

The core methodology may be adapted to suit the need for a protected space to reflect on experience, in a group setting, by leaving aside the final stage of practical action in the world

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<sup>104</sup> See Belenky and colleagues (1986) on the epistemological ‘constructivist’ position, which I outlined in Chapter Two.

(the prime knowing in Heron). It seems that knowledge must be suspended in order to allow that which is mysterious or doubtful to remain just that: 'remaining content with half-knowledge' as the poet John Keats defined his Negative Capability (1958, p. 79). The selected biographies that follow offer an insider perspective on the experience of integrating ways of knowing and claiming voice within a research process.

## Chapter Six

### Integrating knowing and self-knowing: Beatrice's and Federico's experience

Learning makes sense with reference to the history of the subject, to his expectations, to his bearings, to his concept of life, to his relationships to others, to the image he has of himself and to that which he wants to give to others. (Charlot, 1997, p. 85)

#### Introduction

In this chapter, I bring a *micro*-level analysis to bear on the co-operative research experience, from the perspective of two members of the Bicocca group, Beatrice and Federico. I explore the materials produced by each of these participants during the research process – including their contributions to group conversations – using an auto/biographical method (Merrill and West, 2009) and above all following West's recommendation to '“play” imaginatively and thoughtfully with every aspect of our engagement with others and their stories' (ibid. p. 137). While trying to find my way through the material, to practice drawing on alternative ways of knowing – that would enable me to feel distinct from but connected with the material (experiential knowing), and to intuit patterns in it (presentational knowing), following Heron (1992) – I began to sometimes rework the participants' texts into a poetic form. This representational method of analysis, which is part of the 'writing as inquiry' method (Richardson, 1997), allowed me to involve my body in the research process as a site of understanding, by means of poetic and intellectual-affective resonance – given that 'poetry, built as it is on speech as an *embodied* activity, touches both the cognitive and the sensory in the speaker and the listener' (ibid. p. 143, italics in original).

Because my approach here is auto/biographical, in this chapter I allow the participants to speak for themselves through their material – drawings, prose and poetic texts, dialogues –, as well as through the poems composed by me with their words. Going back and forth between self and other, and inner and outer authority, my analysis is informed by a connected model of knowing (Belenky *et al.*, 1986) that envisages the self as implicated in its object of knowledge. I refer to the literature 'when theories ... [can] help make sense of material' (Merrill and West, 2009, p. 137). Overall therefore, this is an auto/biographical, embodied, constructivist piece of research in which 'the text perform[s] what it preach[es]' (Richardson, 1997, p. 71).<sup>105</sup>

My general argument in this thesis is that professionals are often trapped inside narrow, and sometimes negative and self-limiting relationships with knowledge, and perhaps also with

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<sup>105</sup> To clearly separate the different voices within the text, in this chapter and in Chapter Eight on selected CCCU biographies, which follows the same format, I use italics to flag autobiographical insights into my own relationship with knowing and professional becoming, and special fonts to identify, on the one hand, participants' voices – whether in speech or text – and on the other, my own poetic re-presentations of their words (Richardson, 1997).

experts. The aim of this chapter is to analyse the transformative processes undergone by selected participants during the cooperative workshops, in terms of integrating mind and heart in knowing, de-idealizing experts, and acquiring a more integrated knowledge of self.

**Federico** was 31 and at the time of the research was working on a PhD in the field of teaching literature and general didactics. Specifically, he was researching the link between fictional immersive experience and learning; I wonder if he came to our workshops on ‘embodied narratives’ because he was curious to ask big questions about narrative and prelinguistic experience. He also coordinated teacher training courses on teaching literature, so perhaps he found the aesthetic and autobiographical approaches encouraged on our project to be strangely different to his own experience. I realize now that he, like Francesco, was a philosophy graduate, so perhaps some underlying competition came into play also.

**Beatrice** had filled the roles of partner, project director and coordinator at a social services cooperative since 2007. Her MA in Education had been supervised by Laura Formenti, and she had also participated some years previously in the theatre laboratory conducted by Francesco as part of the BA programme, so she came to the research project with expectations. Beatrice coordinated others in her work, so perhaps she was eager to develop a broader perspective. She was fifteen years older than me and this made me look at her in terms of imagining my own future, although her direct involvement in social work meant that she worked in a different field to mine.

It seemed to me, from my observations during the workshops, that Federico started out from an intellectualized relationship with knowing, gradually coming to ‘live his questions’ more, and finally integrating different ways of knowing and perhaps of self-knowing. Beatrice displayed some fixed notions and idealizations in her relationship with ‘expert’ knowledge, but during the research she seemed to develop a more ‘playful’ approach to knowing, and to find it easier to tolerate professional situations in which she was as yet lacking a clear vision of how to proceed. Both participants’ processes of transformation in relation to knowledge illuminate aspects of self-construction that might be generalized to wider groups of professionals in education.

### **1) Roots in intellectual knowledge**

On the first day, participants’ narratives were based on their choice of an image to evoke their professional selves. Beatrice’s showed a tube station, a train line, dark, busy, varied, a place through which people and stories silently transit. She was looking at them from a distance as in a movie clip, as the structure of the image below suggests.

Fig. 19 Image of the professional self chosen by Beatrice, Bicocca, 16/01/2015.



*Beatrice's choice set off a train of reflexive reasoning in me, about my own relationship with knowledge. I had taken this particular picture in New York in 2014 while attending a conference on Transformative Learning there. It had proved to be a significant experience in my life as a researcher. Although I was supposed to be in NYC to learn about Mezirow's transformation theory, I did not really know what I was doing. Similarly to when I had been on my Eastern travels, I was feeling the urge to unlearn a researcher identity that had begun to feel too rigid. New York was pulsing with life. I did not really feel part of it, but I was on my own journey and looking outwards, sometimes. When the group was invited to write reflexively about their chosen images, as evocative of their individual roots of knowing, Beatrice extracted a poem from her written piece (Cupane, 2009) which she entitled 'Liberation', and which spoke about her young years on the outskirts of Milan, and falling in love with a young man who introduced her to 'culture'. Selecting whole verses from Beatrice's original poetic text, I made a further extract of my own to get to the core, maintaining Beatrice's original title.*

#### LIBERATION

From a distance looking on  
From close by I act and get lost  
From town to town  
My Dad, travelling while searching

My Mum, doing and being  
A person  
Was to bring me to teeming Milan,  
In the University cloisters, in the thick notes, in the used books  
Then, later  
Reassured, I could free my doubts.

Del Negro, poetic extract from Beatrice's poem on her roots of knowing, Canterbury, 23/03/2016.

'Liberation' spoke of the fear and danger of meeting the other, the unknown, and 'culture', which is the entire world beyond oneself and one's place of origin. Beatrice accepts losing something (a world of certainties) and getting somewhat lost with others.

*Extracting this poem generated resonances for me with both my father's story and my own, in different ways: it evoked for me the key influence of one's family and inherited ways of knowing that at some point come to constrain one's freedom. The encounter with an 'intellectual' led Beatrice, my father, and me, to dare to approach a new kind of knowing. Culture can become an object of desire (and plenitude, in a Girardian sense, Charlot, 1997). I don't know what reassured Beatrice, but in my poetic extract, doubt came as the closing word, suggesting a sense of struggle.*

Federico chose a picture of a nomad's tent in the middle of a desert.

Fig. 20 Image of the professional self chosen by Federico, Bicocca, 16/01/2015.



This image evoked for me a vast, alien, and inhospitable space, which, paradoxically, is the space closest to the self and its quest. It reminded me of my travels, during which I had searched for different places, challenging situations, and unfamiliar conditions that might bring me to doubt my previously held assumptions and ask questions about beauty, as Virginia Woolf (1985) put it in *Moments of Being*.

Federico called his poem on the roots of his knowing ‘Shred’. He wrote in a cryptic style as though he were trying to camouflage himself from the researcher’s inquiring eye. He implied things without saying them straight out, initially leading me to experience a sense of estrangement. What was he talking about? I was concerned that perhaps he was carrying a big mask onto the research scene.

But as he read the poem – which he had extracted from his reflexive text –, I began to think that he was bringing some difficult material into the research process, and that perhaps poetic language was allowing him to do this. I read his work again in its original form.

#### SHRED

The dark down there  
First look at it, swallowing  
Then having equipping myself with corpuscular effects  
The biological-existential meaning  
Comes back to my cerebellum.  
No. Desire to respect the child.

Federico’s poem on his roots of knowing, Bicocca, 16/01/2015.

His poem ventured into less conscious territories (‘dark down there’, ‘swallowing’), and I was surprised to find that the last sentence was so different from the others, so clear. Who was the child and what was the threat? There seemed to be something that required protection from harsh conditions. Was the only available shelter a thin shred?

I was also surprised to notice that in the final conversation of the day (Heron’s propositional knowledge stage, 1996), Federico in contrast with his poem, declared himself to be doubtful about the influence of the past on the self, as reported in Chapter Five (see bullet point ‘expressing disagreement with the facilitation’, supra p. 104). Where had the child gone?

During the final conversation, Federico asked what pushes us to know – a philosophical question.



Federico: ... But this push that makes us all argue to some extent that we like knowing, discovering, continuing to do so, that this makes us feel good... I've asked myself about the origin of this push. What is this push? ...

Alberto: At the practical level, this has to do with asking myself what do I do with this knowing.

Federico: I didn't mean that, but that is another level. [...]

Beatrice: Maybe being 44, I am more in this phase where I see the metro stop full of people and I see myself there ... I get up, I do my stops, I arrive somewhere, speak, converse, go home ... this knowing enters naturally into daily life, so you ask yourself how you use it but mostly you use it and you ask yourself about this.

Recorded final conversation, Bicocca, 16/01/2015.

Here Beatrice seemed to be arguing that knowing comes with adopting a reflective position as one's professional life unfolds.

## 2) Speaking about being silenced

The focus of the second session was learning biographies, evoked by drawing rivers as a guiding metaphor; the participants' individual productions were composed as shown below.

Fig. 21 Final composition of the rivers of learning, Bicocca, 13/02/2015.



Beatrice placed her drawing at the source of the group's river. I created another poem of my own by extracting fragments from the prose texts that she produced during the day. My poetic

reworking of her texts suggest that the spring of learning (and professional?) biographies is personal and deeply embodied:<sup>106</sup>

WAVE

Ring Ring  
Clara was home alone,  
Completely naked

Ring Ring  
I was 10-12 years old  
But I knew what we should do

Ring Ring  
Find a way  
I will be bowels and great silence

Blooming path, courage and determination  
Clara, one of us?

Del Negro, poetic extract from the materials of Beatrice (Day 2), Milan, 04/01/2016.

As I interpret it, this poem conveys a narrative of emergency or emergence. The repetition of the ringing sound made me anxious: was it calling Beatrice to enter a relationship, seeking a response from her, but she was too young? The body was present from the start; it would become the space of a fragile but ‘good-enough’ professional self, whose knowing was based on close listening to others’ stories in uncertain conditions. Beatrice told a story with elements of anxiety and pain, and an urgency to find knowledge so as to take care of others. Something in me resonated with the notion of responsibility for taking care of adults playing adult games, as though the young girl were responsible for what she could not yet understand... hence the great silence? What strategy of knowledge was enacted by silence in this story? I did not know. It made me think of issues of being silenced too. Beatrice told a story of a path of knowing that was developing and blooming, yet a tough one, *like mine*.

Federico’s drawing was placed towards the end of the group’s river. In a very physical gesture, he had squeezed red and black paint onto a black sheet of paper. His texts spoke about being confronted by countless alternatives that provided no direction. I made a poetic

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<sup>106</sup> In composing the poem, I used all three texts that Beatrice had produced that day: the imaginative writing exercise on the river, the epistemological writing exercise on one’s learning biography, and the autobiographical piece ‘The time that’ (see Chapter Four). These are fully reproduced in Appendix n. 6, as an example of my method of poetic extraction following Cupane (2009).

extract from them that helped me to think about the risk of abstracting the self from the professional, and about anxieties related to making sense of why things are as they are.<sup>107</sup>

#### TANGLED CLUMP

We don't know when  
We don't know why  
We don't know where

Regular rivulets: 14066  
Infernal skein, non-direction  
The swallowing swamp that hides it from sight

It fakes, abstracting me  
Illusory, the white

Knowledge?  
Placate anxiety and then disperse it.

Del Negro, poetic extract from Federico's materials (Day 2), Milan, 04/01/2016.

This poem spoke of the interplay between abstraction and embodiment. Within a dichotomy of knowing/not knowing, ideal knowledge, regular and infinite, actually became nonsensical and threatening to the person. I associated this with the myth of ideal knowledge that sometimes unconsciously influences the academic context, which both Federico and myself were being socialized into *through* elected forms of knowing (Charlot, 1997) – mainly intellectual. And yet the 'clump' in the title of the poem evoked the blood that nurtures our biological life. Was Federico telling a story about his impossible embodiment as an academic researcher?

The reader will remember (see supra p. 110) that Federico wrote critically about the concept of integrating aesthetic and narrative kinds of knowledge; I wondered if he was experiencing *déplacement* from his usual ways of doing narrative work.

### 3) Engaging with aesthetic knowledge

The third session on strategies of knowing opened with participants choosing their preferred metaphors of knowledge (Fabbri and Munari, 2010), and making an *assemblage*.

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<sup>107</sup> I used two of Federico's texts from this session: the imaginative writing piece on the river, and the epistemological writing exercise on his learning biography (see Chapter Four).

This is a picture of what Beatrice produced:

Fig. 22 Beatrice's *assemblage*, Bicocca, 20/03/2016.



Beatrice said that she had proceeded by improvisation, as opposed to others who worked from a plan. On touching the creative materials, new thoughts came to her (free associations, as argued by Bollas, 2009) about both technical-technological and human elements in her relationship with knowing.

Beatrice: I noticed that having the three-dimensional ... I imagined the universe, a much bigger environment ... A star. And also the choice of colours, I always choose earth, natural colours and in contrast, with this material available, instinct drew me towards metallic materials. I don't want to ask myself too many questions now, I want to let this thing work inside me.

Recorded conversation on the *assemblages*, Bicocca, 20/03/2015.

The following is the poetic extract that I derived from her writings on that day. The first two stanzas are taken from her text on knowledge and the third from the reflexive text on her profession.

Hence, my poem speaks about both knowing and professional self-construction. The title is that given by Beatrice to her *assemblage*.<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>108</sup> I used two texts from this third day: the imaginative piece on the *assemblage*, and the reflexive piece 'How does this object speak to you about your profession?' (see Chapter Four).

## STAR OF SOUNDING METAL AND DNA

Deep centre, dark but necessary  
Movement activated by my intelligence  
Need for meaning and pacification

Maybe what you see is no longer  
Fragments radiate around me  
Long timeframes, broadening, unity

The role: task and function  
A unique knowing, technical, creative, epistemological  
And the human celestial component of the profession.

Del Negro, poetic extract from Beatrice's materials (Day 3), Milan, 14/01/2016.

Many different levels had been drawn together: it was all there. Knowledge and role, which I had put together from different texts, now seemed to form one holistic centripetal movement. I was picking up a sense of idealization of the professional 'in-control', which was perhaps distancing Beatrice from things that were 'felt' and unnamed – in contradiction with her earlier reference to knowing as emerging from the unfolding of living. *This reminds me now of my own drawing of the mentor figure (an activity from the following session), which also showed a star, both burning and cold. Why was knowledge so distant?*

From her poetic piece on the word '*sapere*' (knowing), using Cupane's (2009) practice of producing unusual associations by working on assonance and horizontal sound expansion, Beatrice produced a poem that she called 'Wisdom'. On reading it, I could identify with its sense of searching, excitement, and responsibility for sharing personal knowledge; on the other hand, thinking was frightening, Beatrice said: she came and went from it.

## WISDOM

Tasting  
Something  
Savoury  
Taste  
  
Fishing  
A heavy

Treasure  
And sharing out between us  
The king's booty

Thinking  
And at times out of fear disappearing  
Yet coming back  
Wise.

Beatrice, poem on '*sapere*' (knowing), Bicocca, 20/03/2015.

Federico produced this *assemblage* which he called 'Nasziride':

Fig. 23 Federico's *assemblage*, Bicocca, 20/03/2016.



This is what he wrote about the *assemblage*.

Stratosphere, -57 Fahrenheit degrees, beyond Andromeda, Marassic late-Mesozoic period.  
Nasride is my planet. I am my planet. I am all its sounds absorbed by spatial molecular sound.  
I am all that will happen after the planet. I am all the interstellar gazes that make antilight  
calculations of the power pulsed to create energy, on the stories told about the Paleo-  
Christian missions that designed me ... Federico does not know who I am. Our larvae have  
captured him and he, imagined.

Federico's 'Let me introduce myself' piece on the *assemblage*, Bicocca, 20/03/2015.

Federico wrapped fabric and string around the polystyrene base of his *assemblage* leaving no surface exposed: his was a unitary piece. His description of the creative process fascinated me, as he appeared to be experimenting with the irrational and embodied possibilities of aesthetic representation:

Federico: I found myself in the process of partially abandoning the metaphor and the instructions provided and being transported by the pleasure of constructing ... and this helped me at the creative level, somehow, I felt freer to put things together ... So when I wrote, I asked myself about what relationship this creation had [with my knowing]. I tried to reason about the fact that it had no relationship whatsoever ... and I described a world ... But in doing so, I realized that um this creation of a parallel universe, these names of stars, universes, planets... are so... um an area that fascinates me a lot ... space, meaning a theme that fascinates me ... I tried to go outside and by going outside, I was coming back inside a bit.

Recorded conversation on *assemblages*, Bicocca, 20/03/2015.

I told him that his representation of space evoked for me the maximum human desire for knowledge through science. Francesco suggested that in Kubrick's *2001 Space Odyssey*, the extreme limit of human imagination is represented, in the closing scene, as a human embryo: the farther we go into the unknown, the more we come back with some intuition about ourselves. Federico enjoyed this idea. I wondered if by representing something apparently distant from his knowing, Federico had unexpectedly revealed something of himself.

Federico left the workshop early for work reasons. This had happened on other occasions: 'Now you see me, now you don't'. I was slightly offended that he had better things to do. I asked myself how strange this project and its methods might seem to him and whether, honestly, I would have dared to join the group as a participant myself. *Which, in fact, I did not: my reflexive process was separate – outside of the public space (Winnicott, 1965). And I did not have the courage to create my own assemblage representing knowledge!*

Writing the reflective report, and the difficult conversation that it elicited – about the participants' need to acquire scientific knowledge for their work from this research, and about the professional recognition afforded to 'scientific' medical, psychiatric, and technological knowledge – were important to Beatrice. She positioned herself against a backdrop of a scientific authority (her mentor Formenti), and expressed her need for a more traditionally rigorous knowledge, or what Belenky and colleagues (1986) refer to as separate knowing. I felt guilty at the time for being uncertain about what I was doing. Reassured by the group that we were all bringing our full presence to this shared space of inquiry, Beatrice began to tell more personal stories about experts, mentors, and her own needs. *And so did I.*

#### 4) The self as dream and desire

The session on mentors started with a reading and discussion on J.L. Borges' short story, *Circular Ruins* (see Appendix n. 5). Beatrice noticed that the mentor's desire to create another person first took the form of an illusory 'project', based on meticulous planning and the intellectualization of experience.

Beatrice: Something has changed for me in relation to Danilo Dolci's phrase: "Each of us can only grow if dreamt about". ... I always attributed a positive meaning to [this phrase] in the sense of every human being's need to feel that a possibility has been projected for them ... In contrast this text disturbed me in relation to the idea that it is possible to make projections for the lives of others. ... This evoked a sense of being consumed for me ... [the text] says: "this magical project". Which is a term we use all the time: project, project, project. Well, in the end it consumed him and proved to be an illusion. ...

Recorded conversation on the Borges story, Bicocca, 10/04/2015.

The function of fire in Borges's short story was also discussed. Federico spoke of a divine element in human relationships, which is both generative and destructive. Was he speaking about the shadows of human love and desiring?

Federico: ... the image that I formed of the fire is not one of knowing but of a primordial force ... supernatural, divine ... which he [the mentor] cannot control, with which there is a relationship, [a force] that exercises a generative power ... and also a destructive power ...

Beatrice: I thought of the moment when I chose my profession ... little things related to how I had experienced my relationship with the world of education: what others had represented for me, what had made me suffer, what had done me good, and the idea of playing out this experience in a more conscious way in the world, in life. I made this become my work ... "Fire" ... , [i.e.] awareness, "was the only one who knew his son", [i.e.] what you generate of yourself, "was a phantom". So it [the self] is a dream, an expectation, a desire.

Recorded conversation on the Borges story, Bicocca, 10/04/2015.

Beatrice unveiled more of her professional story, indicating that it involved an element of emancipation from her past – perhaps from being silenced in education (Belenky *et al.*, 1986). The new self that is possible for any of us to generate, 'in relationships with others and within the matrices of culture' (Sclater, 2004, p. 326), is a dream and a desire. Perhaps this man and woman (Federico and Beatrice) were speaking of something similar though using very different words.

The circular ruins of the temple, in the Borges story, also attracted the group's attention. Federico commented that:



Federico: The circular ruins are also those pieces of one's story that one cannot reconstruct because they are ruins, they have fallen apart, they have broken into pieces and one cannot get them back into in their original form ... these remains, these pieces come back to you, they strike you. They have fallen apart but keep on belonging to you, though not in the negative sense of not being able to reconstruct an original form or your past, your stories. They are ruins because what is lived is continuously being redefined, lost again, destroyed, and recreated.

Recorded conversation on the Borges story, Bicocca, 10/04/2015.

Was he speaking about biography (and self) in a slightly different way to the earlier research sessions? The metaphor of the ruins seemed to have given him a way to think about the fragments of a life that cannot be recomposed (the past is past), but that cannot be forgotten either. The ruins are alive within oneself, because the past is always being recreated in one's present – 'the process is one of always-becoming, it is psycho-social, it involves the ongoing "identity work" of a human agent' (Sclater, 2004, p. 326). This seemed to be a new insight for Federico.

Each participant drew an aesthetic representation of their mentor, and wrote a list of 10 adjectives to describe it. Federico produced this:

Fig. 24 Federico's portrait of the mentor, Bicocca, 10/04/2015.



He is not nitrogen membrane

He is complete amorphous

He is space-time dilated

He is pseudo-unidirectional

He is icily water

Federico's WAY on the mentor, Bicocca, 10/04/2015.

He explained that he had not visualized what would emerge before beginning work on the painting. He had chosen to work with cold colours in contrast with his earlier drawing of the roots of knowing, in which he had used 'visceral colours' (red and black). Federico stated that he had worked on the relationship between the mentor and the mentee:

Federico: It is a very interpenetrated relationship in which it is not possible to understand if the mentor is blue. Initially he was blue but then while drawing I thought that he could also be the white ... he has no shape but is strewn inside the other ... I tried to use the same brush stroke to represent the fact that both bear the same impression. ... Frankly I cannot understand very well why I used... I am convinced that it was right to choose these colours to contrast with those chosen for the other activity um... but I cannot explain it in full.

Recorded presentation of the portrait of the mentor by Federico, Bicocca, 10/04/2015.

Federico seemed to be beginning to appreciate the possibility of doing meaningful work which he felt confident that he was approaching in the right way, although intellectually he did not 'know' why this was so. He described his aesthetic action as a creative process in ways that resonate with Bollas's idea that in the emotional experience of engaging with objects in our unconscious lives 'we are revealed as seekers and interpreters of our own identity' (Bollas, 2009, p. 1). Federico was now able to speak to the group about his not knowing.

Beatrice produced this portrait and list of adjectives:

Fig. 25 Beatrice's portrait of the mentor, Bicocca, 10/04/2015.



- He is obscure
- He is alive
- He is erotic
- He is double
- He is veiled
- He is lonely
- He is thinking
- He is strong
- He is first (before)
- He is mobile (slightly but powerfully)

Beatrice's WAY on the mentor, Bicocca, 10/04/2015.

She wrote about an episode with her mentor which she decided to read aloud to the group. It revealed aspects of competitiveness: she desired to become more skilled than he in their shared art (as in Girard's mimetic desire, 1961).

Beatrice: [He] was a person who was simply much better than me at doing one particular thing ... I wrote that: "I would like to appropriate his art", which describes to some extent how I felt in relation to this particular competence which I thought that he had and which I would have liked to develop ... I felt deeply judged because [I had been] corrected in my way of ... implementing this art; it was as though something had been damaged in my relationship with this mentor ... he had manipulated my text without asking my permission. The product was better ... but I felt ... "diminished". It was a turning point in my relationship with ... the professional knowing that he represented for me. I wrote this sentence: "And yet I would like him to know that I now feel equal or at least equal to my master" ... At a certain point, you feel legitimated to be totally yourself, and the mentor loses some of his significance as your mentor.

Recorded story of an episode with a mentor by Beatrice, Bicocca, 10/04/2015.

The theme of betrayal had returned. This betrayal seemed to shatter an idealization of the other, whose 'art' Beatrice did not need to emulate anymore, as she could now be herself and practice her art on her own terms. And yet the dynamic of being told that she was wrong, accepting fallibility, seemed challenging. *Of course, this resonated strongly with me.* Federico, in contrast with Beatrice, chose not to read his story aloud. His handwriting was difficult to decipher, and I could have asked for his help, but I decided to respect his choice not to share this story.

##### **5) Intellectualized environments in education**

In May we met for the intensive weekend of performative practices. I have deliberately excluded the materials produced during the role-play and theatrical *mise en scène* from my analysis. This is due to the different nature of this data, in that both activities required the participants to directly represent a given interaction and so precluded them from becoming reflexive at a meta level.

On the Saturday, we watched Yaron Zilberman's film, *A Late Quartet*, as a prelude to thinking about working with others. I analyse Beatrice's comments here, because Federico was absent on the day. Beatrice spoke frequently, expressing frustration with her work. She said that the main character in the film was 'caught off guard' by his wife, also a musician in the quartet, because when he spoke most truthfully, she did not 'reflect him back' (Winnicott, 1971, p. 86). For Beatrice, the conflict portrayed in the film had not been resolved given the absence of verbal clarification among the members of the quartet, but not all the other participants agreed with her.

Beatrice: But the closing scene does not convince me ... I would not have played in the final concert.

Francesco: Why?

Beatrice: That passage is very difficult. It is not clear what happened, or is it actually because the first violin and the girl broke up, things happened in between but the fact is, have people talked to each other? Have they clarified? ...

Raffaella: I've chosen this scene as the most resonant because ... they spoke through something else, through their action, their emotion, their passion.

Recorded conversation on the film *A Late Quartet*, Bicocca, 09/05/2015.

Beatrice later commented that in work environments there can be a risk of over-intellectualism. In contrast, in playing music, harmony is embodied.

Beatrice: One lesson that I have taken from this film is that they played together. I don't know if any of you have ever tried to play with other people. It's an overwhelming emotion ... few things are as involving as playing music. I have also played wind instruments, the vibration that you feel is very powerful and the body has some moments of [smiles]. Perhaps I am thinking now that one of the flaws in our work is that we intellectualize a lot. If only we tried to live some moments with more human completeness ... explanations are there but there's also the experience, the art, I don't know how else to say it. For me personally, it would be helpful to try to think of working in a group more in this light.

Recorded conversation on the film *A late quartet*, Bicocca, 09/05/2015.

In the professional game, there are issues of power – ‘our society [...] values the words of male authority’, warned Belenky *at al.*, 1986, p. 146 – and of reciprocal social identifications and hierarchies of knowledge (Charlot, 1997). Beatrice also spoke of her disillusionment with the socio-educational environment as ‘an environment just like any other’.

On Sunday morning, Beatrice shared some thoughts that had come to her during the night. She had slept alone as her partner was away, and she had been thinking about the film. She brought up eroticism in the educational relationship which nobody had yet mentioned.

Beatrice: ... I wanted to say another very important thing about the film ... sexuality and Eros in professional relationships ... something that has a sexual, affective character, etc. ... even more so in our work, I was wondering about how these aspects affect our professional relationships: on work teams, in our working relationships with our clients, with our young people.

Recorded conversation on the film *A late quartet*, Bicocca, 09/05/2015.

## 6) Feeling while thinking

On the last day, Federico and Beatrice were in the same subgroup with the task of developing a theory about knowing and self-construction.<sup>109</sup> Federico, Beatrice and Giacomo represented their theory with a pair of shoes placed between a crumbled paper and an arrow:

Fig. 26 Representation of Group Theory 1, Bicocca, 06/06/2015.



Their theory was that the process of knowing-becoming in professional practice is never given, but constantly moves between two poles of ‘desire’ and ‘violence’.

Federico: There is a relationship which is very much an exercise of power, with a strongly egoistic dimension of satisfaction, both biological... so knowing in order to eat, to fill ourselves... but also satisfaction in being recognised by others. The fact of being *formateurs*, of working in a pedagogical context ... at the same time it is also a tension towards something.

Recorded presentation of Group Theory 1, Bicocca, 06/06/2015.

Hence, in doing educational work, we exercise power over others to satisfy a need of our own for self-affirmation, yet Federico suggested that there is something beyond this, something that happens between the educator and the other (Winnicott, 1971). Beatrice argued that we

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<sup>109</sup> The other two theories were about the methodology of spiralling, and the distillation of the professional self through living, respectively.

have (shared) responsibility for the setting that we make available because it produces reciprocal formative effects that are unpredictable... and not always ideal!

Beatrice: ... everything that we have learned about how to set up an educational dispositive<sup>110</sup> ... this power that acts cannot always be totally governed ... the “crumpling” appeared to us to be a dimension that everybody has to go through: the *formateur*, the educator, the teacher, and ... those who draw benefit or otherwise ... from our action.

Recorded presentation of Group Theory 1, Bicocca, 06/06/2015.

By evoking the body and material objects to conceptualize knowing and self in professional practice, the participants took another step towards de-idealizing their professional practice, and seemed to have composed multiple levels in interaction with one another. This group also represented the waste generated by their theory, by putting the individual folders that were not used under the carpet.



Fig. 27 Folders under the carpet, Bicocca, 06/06/2015.

I see this as representing the constraints that inevitably apply even in a co-operative inquiry setting. In the final conversation, Federico reported an experience of integration that had made him quite happy.

Federico: ... the fact of living these metaphors, of constructing them, living them at the corporeal level ... I think the richness is precisely this, having been inside an experience that allowed us to question ourselves with a sensory, intellectual richness that is um unusual, it had never happened to me ... that is, seeing these shoes here in front of me, the fact that the three of us chose them ... having constructed them [the displayed shoes] in that moment makes me feel that they are, I'm not sure whether, closer to me, or you feel like they are part of you.

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<sup>110</sup> Beatrice used the word ‘dispositive’ but seemed to be referring to the setting. In Foucault (1975), the dispositive is a much broader concept that comprises institutions, architectures, discourses, and postures.

The idea that the ‘sensory’ can enrich the knowledge we construct from ‘inside’ our experiences, has also been proposed by Bollas, because actual objects ‘carry the *weight* of the real’ into our deep level thinking (Bollas, 2009, p. 84, my italics). Aesthetic experience helps us to access the hidden sensory dimension in our professional work with others, in the evocative object world in which we all live (Bollas, 2009); this dimension makes thinking satisfying because perceivable as ‘part of us’. Had Federico had an insight about how it might be possible to reflect and refract the ‘real’ (Richardson, 1997) via an embodied reflexivity?

Perhaps the material under the carpet represents lived experience that cannot be made sense of rationally; *and for me too this is a useful reminder to keep my questions and my senses open.*

### 7) Salvaging the self in professional practice<sup>111</sup>

During the follow-up session, the participants produced an object that represented how they had changed as an outcome of the research. This idea had been anticipated by Beatrice, who had asked that the group spend time sharing changes in their professional self-perception. She called her representation ‘Wounded flowering’.

Fig. 28 Beatrice’s object representing the changed self, Bicocca, 16/10/2015.



<sup>111</sup> This expression is taken from Celia Hunt’s and Linden West’s (2009) article ‘Salvaging the self in adult learning’, which I come back to in Chapter Nine.



Beatrice spoke about a process of change that had taken place during the period in which she had been attending the cooperative inquiry workshops; given that her role at the social services cooperative she worked for was making her unhappy, she was beginning to think about changing it.

Beatrice: The flowering tree represents my idea of a professional future that I would like to construct, different in its operational choices from the previous one, which is breaking apart painfully ... there are some elements that I no longer feel like managing. I wanted to represent my initial [the first letter in her name] ... It [the letter B] is situated quite near this fragmentation because it is still... I still am very close to this part ... the heart shape is something that this year allowed me to attribute much more importance to my feelings.

Recorded final conversation, Bicocca, 16/10/2015.

Beatrice spoke beautifully about salvaging the most authentic ‘nuclei’ of her passion for her work, so as not to cut off her professional history, but to grow something new out of it.

Francesco: What is the meaning of the buttons for you? Within the overall dynamic of the movement, I see that they are in specific positions.

Beatrice: The circular shape seemed important to salvage because it recurred along our [research] path, the spirals. The ‘nucleus’, I had this word in mind, the nucleus needs to be recovered: the nucleus of self, the nucleus of my work, the nucleus of my knowing and thinking ... I wanted to put them [the buttons] in different places, [with] the flowers, [with] the fragmented part, because something [of me] still remains there. And this for me is the path, the base, hence the idea that some nuclei of my profession, the existential nuclei can find contact with the earth on which they rest.

Recorded final conversation, Bicocca, 16/10/2015.

The buttons appeared to function as evocative objects (Bollas, 2009) which Beatrice was using to think about developing a greater sense of self-integration (Winnicott, 1965) and about legitimizing her intuitions.

Federico produced this drawing, giving it the title ‘Pus’:

Fig. 29 Federico's object representing the changed self, Bicocca, 16/10/2015.



He attempted to question his own way of being a professional in education, and where his relationship with education and knowledge had originated from.

Federico: And the answer that I give myself now, looking at this representation is that ... it has to do, on the one hand, with care ... as an existential dimension ... On the other hand, with power, meaning the exercise of power. ... These two dimensions seem to be two sides of the same thing, and to characterize to some extent the origin, of both my desire to know and my desire to construct a profession in education ... The change is in terms of awareness, a change of posture, a change of perspective, in the sense of having touched burning matter with your own hand ... making others feel good generates for you a sense of... life, a sense of being alive ... it means that your profession has an anchoring that comes from elsewhere.

Recorded final conversation, Bicocca, 16/10/2015.

I was hugely intrigued and observed that at first I had seen a sun in his drawing, and that this had made me think of the power to both nurture and destroy, hence I had seen the image as including a generative element. Federico surprised me again bringing in the female.

Federico: Yes it has a generative component. The dynamics between power and transformation and care have been theorized throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. But I see the generative aspect represented as a very female figure ... it is intended to be a female genital

organ ... that generated life and takes care of it, so care as a very female relationship, which explores in me a female part that is present, and maybe in this pedagogical and formative dimension emerges more clearly.

Recorded final conversation, Bicocca, 16/10/2015.

Francesco suggested, and Federico agreed, that the power of care, sometimes ignored by the pedagogical discourse, is an ancestral love that both nurtures and kills – the ‘semiotic’ order written about by Kristeva (Smith, 1998). Federico brought to the research space something that was very personal, and yet that transcended his own story: he was now asking big questions but from the perspective of his own unique relationship with knowing. ‘Congruent knowing’ (Heron, 1992, p. 55) becomes a mediator between personal psychological reality and shared ‘cultural’ reality – as I argue with Mosconi (1996) in Chapter Nine.

### **Summary**

From writing these two stories, I learnt that there may be idealizations of the knowledgeable professional. Professionals are concerned with acquiring the information and tools required to function effectively in their roles, as Beatrice emphasized. In constructing themselves through engagement with the available cultural models – appropriating codes, accumulating ideas, and imitating models –, professionals negotiate their sense of self within a game of social identifications via the socialization of knowledge (Charlot, 1997). A widespread model is that of objective knowing, according to which the voice of external authority – usually gender-related rationality – sets the standard of success (Belenky, 1986). Language may be used to disguise the self, but also to speak about being silenced: the outcome is dependent on specific features of a ‘transitional’ (Winnicott, 1971) research space, in which aspects of the self may be played with. Federico seems to have found ways of hiding less and making more of himself present in the research space, and perhaps also in the academic arena. In the co-operative workshops, the body was always there and participants engaged with other ways of knowing, via the ‘sensory’ dimension of experience – as Federico called it –, emotion, and imagination.

Beatrice’s story shed particular light on the pressures to which the social-work practitioner is subjected within a model of doing, working by projects, and managing problems, which leaves less space for connecting with one’s own story, needs and deepest knowing. Beatrice was striving to better integrate heart and reason, past and present, objective and subjective knowing in her professional life (Belenky *et al.*, 1986). Federico showed that in the academic context, it is possible to become trapped inside a dichotomist view of knowing/not knowing that is removed from the flow of life. Thus imagined, knowledge is threatening because it is a positivist ideal of all knowing. In reflecting on his relationship with education, Federico

began to play with the idea of the female, as both exercising ‘interdependence, intimacy, nurturance, and contextual thought’ (Belenky *et al.*, 1986, p. 7), and attending to ambivalence in care – the desire to love and the desire to control the other. As the subject is reintroduced, knowing becomes more satisfying because it is less dogmatic: there is always more than one voice (Richardson, 1997).

Beatrice and Federico helped me to think about knowing and the ‘ongoing “identity task” ’ (Sclater, 2004, p. 326) of self-construction, which they experienced during the research workshop, from both inside and outside the boundaries of academia. Federico, a young man, philosopher and academic researcher, moved from an intellectualized epistemological style, towards integrating different ways of knowing with the body as key (Heron, 1992). Beatrice, a woman in her forties, and social services coordinator, entered the cooperative workshops with a myth of knowledge and the ‘expert’ and shifted towards integrating subjective and objective knowing (Belenky *et al.*, 1986) by legitimizing her intuition.



## *Chapter Seven*

### **Case Study 2**

#### **Introduction**

In this chapter, I outline my second case study, based on the workshops conducted at Canterbury Christ Church University. As in the previous case study on the Milano-Bicocca group, I hone in on the process that underpinned the emergence of a co-operating group of researchers, or what I have been referring to in constructivist terms as a ‘collective mind’.<sup>112</sup> Once again, I explore how the group developed a shared and satisfying way of languaging and coordinating its research activity, in response to the part of my research question that concerns the *meso* level of learning – or the context in which learning takes place.

I propose that the process through which the Canterbury participants developed reflexivity and their own way of functioning as a co-operative research group comprised similar steps to those followed by the Bicocca group: Chaos, Positioning, Individuation, Desire, and ‘Playing’. To illustrate this, I analyse the final conversations and session reports of the CCCU participants, highlighting crises and emergent metaphorical understandings (the latter in bold font).

The research context from which these materials have been selected is that described earlier in the thesis: the overall ‘spiral’ structure of the individual sessions is outlined in Chapter Five (supra pp. 99-100), while a detailed breakdown of the activities is provided in Chapter Four.

#### **Dramatis Personae in Canterbury Christ Church University**

Norma, 1984

A foreign PhD student at CCCU, Norma conducted theatre workshops in educational contexts with a view to fostering personal development and social change. She also had experience in teaching English, human rights education and community work with NGOs in deprived and occupied zones. She had completed an MA in Drama and Theatre Education in the UK.

Vanessa, 1968

A registered art psychotherapist with an MA from London Metropolitan University, Vanessa had experience of working with groups in both private and public mental health services. She ran her own private practice, was experimenting with running community-based art therapy groups at the time of the research, while also working as a mixed media painter and artist.

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<sup>112</sup> See Chapter One, supra pp. 30-31.

Kate, 1967

A PhD student at CCCU, Kate was an experienced career guidance professional. She had gained high-level experience in higher education management before working as a career guidance counsellor with young people in Kent. She was conducting her doctoral research on career stories and motivations.

Dilbert, 1967

Now a Senior Lecturer in Education at CCCU, in his earlier career as a schoolteacher Dilbert had held posts of responsibility such as Head of Languages and subject leader for Film Studies and taught a wide range of subjects including English literature and language, philosophy, photography, film studies and performing arts. He had completed his Certificate in Education and PGCE at CCCU where at the time of the research he was undertaking a Doctorate in Education.

Ailsa, 1967

A Senior Lecturer at CCCU with 20 years' experience of teaching and conducting research at university level, Ailsa was a registered nurse with a clinical background in stroke rehabilitation. She taught a holistic person-centred approach to care (knowledge, soul, and clinical skills) with a view to fostering student nurses' ability to connect more deeply with human experience.

Linda, 1961

A career guidance counsellor, Linda had spent the 10 years prior to the research working with secondary, further, and higher education communities in Kent. She had completed an MA in Career Guidance as an adult learner. At the time of the research, she was engaged in a doctoral research project of her own on the theme of developing creative career guidance practices.

Annabel, 1959

A Senior Lecturer at CCCU, Annabel's professional expertise was in the areas of career development and guidance. She had worked extensively in career guidance services for youth provided by local councils, as well as developing and directing mentoring programmes at the university. She was also an active researcher with a strong publications record.

## 1) First step: Chaos

### *Activities*

A group of six<sup>113</sup> met on 24 January 2015 in the Theatre Room, a large space used for drama classes. The theatrical space seemed somewhat intimidating and dark, but on one side it overlooked a garden, and it felt ‘other’ to any of the usual teaching venues on campus. Francesco and I followed the same format and activities that we had implemented with the Bicocca group one week earlier.



Fig. 30 Initial layout of the Theatre Room, CCCU, 24/01/2015. Fig. 31 Poetic extraction in pairs, CCCU, 24/01/2015.

### *Final conversation*

The final conversation, modelled on an ‘epistemological observation’<sup>114</sup> method drawn from Operative Epistemology, took an interesting course in the British group. The first group (comprising Dilbert, Annabel and Linda) produced a smooth and self-confirming conversation that reproduced critical discourses in education. After commenting on the nature of ‘space’ – using intellectual expressions such as inner landscapes, social environments, denouement, corporeality, empiricism and identity – the group talked normatively about self-awareness and change. I was quite surprised and wondered what expectations they had about the research.

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<sup>113</sup> There were changes in the composition of the group during the inquiry process, which required flexibility on our part. Nadia only joined in time for the second session – and did not come back –, while Dilbert was absent on that day and Vanessa left early; Linda also withdrew from the group after this session because she moved away with her family. Vanessa was absent from the third session, and Annabel from the fourth. The weekend was particularly complicated by absences and delays: on the Sunday Dilbert was absent the whole day, while Ailsa only arrived in the afternoons.

<sup>114</sup> On the first day of the research, the final conversation was organized following Fabbri and Munari’s idea of dividing the group in two and having the subgroups take turns to observe one another conversations, followed by a shared discussion (supra p. 32); however, this model frustrated the participants as it reduced the time available to them for reflecting on the day’s activities and sharing their reflections with the group, thus we decided to abandon this method after the first session. Yet in CCCU, as I go on to explain, the fortuitous composition of the two subgroups gave rise to some interesting epistemological observations concerning the kind of knowledge that was being produced.



Linda: I was looking out of the window [smiles] and I was thinking: denouement is not just created within the space, it's also what is created beyond the space as well, so there's a sort of fluidity of movement between the two spaces..

Annabel: And the external influence on that, yeah.

Linda: Yeah, exactly.

Dilbert: Actually... at the beginning we placed ourselves within our corporeality. We are within this form, and in a sense come to terms with knowledge as a negotiation, so we are limited by our empirical awareness of what's around us, and we overlay that, coming to an idea of what we're seeing. We overlay it with a metaphysical understanding of what that means to us ... which fits in with what we have been doing today, because in a way the picture was a substitute for empiricism, wasn't it? It is a substitute engagement with an environment that we then overlaid with a symbolic significance for us, and connected it to other areas of our knowledge. ... So we exercised with what... the notion of existence [f hmm][hmm], and that was one of the things I was struggling most with [laughs], it is a very complex notion ...

Annabel: And that took me back to the different layers when we were talking about knowledge, understanding, learning all those things around identity ... it's usually when it becomes uncomfortable that you have to do something about it and start thinking about it and doing something about it ...

Recorded final conversation, CCCU, 24/01/2015.

They discussed received social assumptions, and Annabel claimed that people are often not critically reflective, because, Dilbert added, they are outside of critical discourse in education. This struck me as paradoxical and I was amused to see where this was going to lead.

Annabel: I think we are at risk of assuming that people are like us actually. There are lots of people who go through their lives without ever challenging their assumptions ...

Linda: It's the acquisition of knowledge isn't it, it's that people will acquire knowledge through their everyday activities, and that's just the way their lives are.

...

Dilbert: I mean, we are working within the discourses that we both value and wished to take part of within this workshop. But this discourse really has quite a limited applicability to many other areas in life. And in fact if we change that perspective then much of what we are saying starts being...

Annabel: [expressing disagreement] I don't think that... discourse for me, I suppose partly because of my job, underpins everything and I take it out to other people.

Dilbert: Oh, it does, but only for those... only for those taking part in the discourse ... people that don't have a capability, or the experience, or awareness will not find this discourse relevant.

Gaia: Won't they?

Recorded final conversation, CCCU, 24/01/2015.

The second group (Ailsa, Kate and Vanessa) responded by expressing their disagreement, and saying that they felt uncomfortable within the 'restrictions of education', as Vanessa put it. In a sense, she described the other group's conversation as a monologue.

Gaia: We can start from the observations that you made in the previous conversation and see how that develops.

Ailsa: I felt a little bit on the fringes of that conversation and that dialogue, because I think most of the people who were in the group were very much from education, and it was hard to connect it [hmm] through my eyes, through my nursing experience, which is very much more about... knowing self as being ... I don't know, I suppose I work in stroke rehabilitation, so my experience with that would be very much on a different level in terms of education ... So, that was my first observation [f hmm] but that is purely from my point of view.

Gaia: Very interesting.

Vanessa: Yeah. I can relate to that actually, cos I also seemed to have a resistance to this space, the fact that people knew this space and I don't know this space at all ... I am coming here as an artist and a creative person who deals with people, and um kind of has a deep aspiration for learning, but not within the restrictions of education, let's say.

Kate: And I come with... one foot in education... -ish, and one out. I don't feel particularly safe in this space even though I am now a member of the institution.

Vanessa: ...- Yes it seems to me personally, the conversation seemed to be quite literal. People seemed to be quite def- quite definite, the ideas seemed to be quite solid. Yeah.

Recorded final conversation, CCCU, 24/01/2015.

Reflections in this group have more personal connections to the lived lives of the participants, such as mothers expressing concern that their teenagers were 'like cogs in the wheel', or working professionals questioning their self-image.

Ailsa: And you talk about professional identity, I've never... connected with that word 'professional'; even though, as you know, I work full days as a ward sister, I would not like to be called that title ...

...

Kate: Quite often we do all define ourselves I think through our occupation, don't we? If I were at a party I would probably... my first or one of my first questions is going to be: what do you do?

Vanessa: Yes, but I hate that question [group laughs] I would never ask it. But you're right, of course, you're right and that's where I'm in difficulty.

Ailsa: And then you get all that stereotyping and labelling of what class you belong to, you know, and it will [inaudible].

Vanessa: Yes, I kind of feel like I've not grown out of that but... there's just so much more to people than structures.

Kate: That's a very loaded question, isn't it, because it implies all kinds of political and class and economic stuff.

Vanessa: And how do you... how am I then more comfortable with you because you've told me what you do, or less comfortable, loads of stuff there.

Recorded final conversation, CCCU, 24/01/2015.

Vanessa wondered why Kate commented that the other conversation flowed better, and went on to ask 'whether you can see this to be just as valid as a beautiful smooth education talk ... in a different language, in a different way'. That was how we came to the first moment of 'embarrassment' (Sclavi, 2003) in the full group conversation: after a long silence, the two subgroups attempted to weave together their different views about the kind of dialogue they wanted to have. I read this as a renegotiation of knowledge relations (Charlot, 1997) among the participants.

I had seen it coming and had prepared for managing the conflict by pointing out, at the end of the second conversation, that it was lucky we had such a diverse group, and Kate, Vanessa and Francesco had supported that observation. Now the participants entered the terrain of dialogue, revising their own initial statements and recognizing those of others.

Gaia: So, last conversation, all together now! [group smiles] I think we can go back to where we left off and to what emerged from the first two conversations ...

[long silence]

Annabel: I think, I just wanted to go back to my notes, because as the observer of the second conversation, what struck me particularly was that what the group was saying... didn't really reflect what I had felt about what we were saying in our group ...

Ailsa: I think that comes down to language, vocabulary and the words that we use and, you know, that whole thing about higher... higher knowledge maybe? Because I am coming in as quite a novice ... I wasn't involved in that, I couldn't relate ...

Linda: Yes, and I think that's really interesting actually because it just goes to show that the way you socialize ... the conversations that you have with those people um you build a vocabulary ...

Vanessa: And it sort of links back, I think, to what you were saying about challenging, you know, you get comfortable and you're comfortable, and you don't of course come away from it. And therefore, you don't have any need to challenge it [hmm]. So perhaps, in a funny sort of way, there's... in fact here with us as a group, there is um something different going on, you know, for me.

Annabel: Yes, yes, absolutely. And the challenge comes from somebody, even something simple like somebody saying, so what's all that about then? ... We do get into this sort of taken for granted ways of doing things, ways of thinking about things. Sort of organizational cultures that grow, the way we do things around here ...

Vanessa: That is quite excluding in a way...

Annabel: Hmm, yes it is.

Recorded final conversation, CCCU, 24/01/2015.

The participants began to change the rhythm of the conversation, by intertwining theory and experiential knowledge, asking each other questions, helping each other to develop a line of thought, and so on. Francesco and I did not ask for deliberate action as an outcome of the session, but concluded by asking the participants to briefly share how they were feeling.

Dilbert: ... So theoretically I might have been aware of a slightly different approach to education but I hadn't experienced it. And today is the first time I've actually experienced working at this pace [hmm-mmm], which is highly alien to the running around that I've been doing for the past ten years ...

Vanessa: ... I think that for the first session it feels very powerful. But I feel completely at sea... it has like brought up lots of little things and um it's kind of thrown open lots. So actually, I feel completely pffffff [group laughs] fragmented and all over the place, which is fine, I can hold that and I'm happy to hold that, but... and it's really good, it's good opening a few things.

Recorded final conversation, CCCU, 24/01/2015.

I felt at ease facilitating this group and I am at ease now as I read back over the kind of comments that I made. There was complicity between Francesco and myself as we helped the group to open up closed narratives, and to see the generative tension between different possible discourses on education and lived experience.

*Report by Linda*

During the following weeks, Linda prepared her report, which was written in what I recognize as academic language, with rhetorical formulae and an orderly narrative. Linda presented herself as an academic and writer, and reported the conflict in the group from a position of apparent neutrality.

I was in the first discussion group and found that as we were all from educational backgrounds related to the university there were commonalities and the conversation flowed easily. This was not necessarily felt by the second discussion group, some felt they had been on the fringe, that they did not share the language we had used and did not feel 'safe' even with membership of the institution.

Linda, report on the first session, 26/01/2015.

Linda appeared to be indirectly voicing a real issue that was coming into play at the beginning of the co-operative process; an issue that, following Winnicott (1965), I would define as the risk of being ridiculed by others when presenting oneself in the public space. An ambivalent relationship with the physical (theatre room) and symbolic (academic institution) space of our research permeated her text: while '[she] felt its vastness, its **cold shell-like existence** did not make [her] feel comfortable and [she] hoped that this feeling would not continue', at the same time 'the space seemed like a "womb" and perhaps the idea [was] to give "birth" to the object of situated knowledge'. No overt issues were raised in the report, and Linda claimed to 'feel [...] at peace with [her]self and the space that [she] had inhabited', a space of knowledge construction that was both cold and womb-like. The following are the fragments selected by the participants:

As it is not possible for me to do one without imbuing the other the account will therefore discuss the former and will contain elements of the latter.

I felt its vastness, its cold shell-like existence did not make me feel comfortable and I hoped that this feeling would not continue.

... the more I looked at my picture, the more it had to say to me ...

... being able to re-form, re-see and re-new so that knowledge continues to evolve.

Fragments chosen by participants in Linda's report on the first session, 21/02/2015.

The fragments selected by the group gave me the impression that the first session had been more difficult for everyone than had been expected. No composition of the whole group featured in the text, while the choice of fragments reflected the group's positive feeling about

the use of aesthetic languages during the session, but the research space was still perceived as alien, being characterized as having a cold shell-like existence.

## 2) Second step: Positioning

### *Activities*

After reading Linda's report, we proceeded with the second day's activities. During the composition exercise, the participants read out their learning biographies and discussed them. Francesco and I consciously set out to encourage the group to make its own of the space, and the initial walking about and movement, and the subsequent drawing activity while spread about the space seemed to be helpful in this regard.



Fig. 32 Drawing in the Theatre Room, CCCU, 21/02/2015.

### *Final Conversation*

It was decided not to divide the group for this conversation, because Nadia was due to leave early which would only leave four people. This was in itself a critical incident or 'embarrassment', as I felt that attendance at the workshops was becoming disrupted and wondered why. I hoped it would stabilize later. To initiate the conversation, participants read stories of significant incidents in their learning lives. Each story concerned a different period of life, from childhood to education and professional lives, and focused on a particular way of relating to knowing: through an imaginary world accessed by reading, through lived experience and human relations, through working freelance and being free to develop, through continuing education renewed with the use of theatre. Some of the attitudes towards education bore an auto/biographical resonance for me. Linda, in her text, spoke about the '**academic tribe**' saying that she, in comparison, 'felt small, insignificant'; and this I thought

seemed to motivate her ‘need for knowledge’ and, perhaps, the – partly unconscious – desire to free herself from an unsatisfying identity. Was she also speaking to us about gaining entry to *this* research group, and what this might entail in terms of Charlot’s (1997) ‘self-image’?

Linda: It was a hunger that would not be sated. I knew in that moment that I had to study for my PhD to restore the balance, to feel complete. I didn’t need to gain entry to their tribe, I was already there.

Recorded final conversation, CCCU, 21/02/2015.

The group went on to position itself in relation to the language used in the standard curriculum vitae, which was generally negatively perceived, apart from Annabel’s divergent idea which fell unheard. I felt that the participants needed to express their frustration with the system, particularly in relation to the field of career counselling, to clear their way to seeing other possibilities.

Kate: I would like to discuss ... the disconnect between the quite deep thinking that we did this morning about our learning biographies and our rivers, with the sterile documents that are the CVs ...

Linda: ... so those words are used in order to identify that we meet certain requirements. But they not necessarily, sort of, evidence of who we are and what we know.

Ailsa: ... I think that [when working with Nadia on the CV] we talked about the people that were involved in my development through my life, to make it more human and make more sense to me, to my development, and my life ...

Annabel: I couldn’t find my CV, it’s just ... because I haven’t used it for such a long time ... the one I used and updated for this was so rigidly structured. It is one we had to use for validation ... But there were things that she [Vanessa] could find in a document that I thought said nothing.

Recorded final conversation, CCCU, 21/02/2015.

This part of the discussion also served to establish a common ground of feeling and values. Looking back, I now wonder whether the participants had needed to feel ‘safe enough’ with the others before running the risk of revealing and constructing less homogeneous and acceptable and, perhaps, truer stories. Towards the end of the conversation, Linda proposed that we use the metaphor of the **flowing river** story of the research group that was beginning to take shape.

Gaia: So, life is calling us, you know, that thing! [group smiles] Maybe just one last question, to wind up the conversation: how are you seeing connections or interactions between learning biography, learning identity, and professional self, from what we did today?

Linda: I think imagining a river was actually really... resonating with ... this particular point of coming together in the workshops is a bit like the beginning of the river. We had a starting point, and then we are flowing through these exercises ... When we saw all the different um pictures together ... I did think at that point how much it grouped us together.

Recorded final conversation, CCCU, 21/02/2015.

A final observation by Linda provoked another ‘embarrassment’ in the group (Sclavi, 2003), for nobody had noticed that the conversation throughout the entire day had been exclusively between women, with the exception of my co-facilitator, although relationships with children and partners had been present in the drawings. This gendered point of view had not been reflected upon, nor had it occurred to me to ask whether or how it differed from the ‘masculine’ narrative that might have been contributed by Dilbert if he had he been present at this session. Was a more assertive narrative, so to speak, only attributable to Dilbert or could an interplay of assertive and silenced voices be observed in these women’s stories too?

Linda: It just struck me, while you [Francesco] were talking, that actually one of the things that we should be thinking about or acknowledging today is that it was a group of women today and so... [group jokes]. I think we need to acknowledge that, because obviously, talking about experience, talking about stopping and starting and the obstacles along the way, the things that have got in our way, the things that may have stopped us... the banks, our supporting ... we as women have difference.

Recorded final conversation, CCCU, 21/02/2015.

The CCCU group displayed a different communication style to the Italian group. While it is beyond my scope in this thesis to venture into the intercultural debate, it seemed to me that criticism was less directly expressed by the English participants, and perhaps this made me, and Francesco too, feel supported by the group; however, it also made it more difficult to understand what was going on, as I later discuss in relation to the performative weekend.

#### *Report by Kate*

Kate reported having felt uncomfortable and ‘nervous’ at the outset of the creative activities, given that she was not used as an adult to performing movement, drawing, or writing narratives; nonetheless, she had found engaging in such activities to be pleasurable and interesting for the most part. She made a comment about memory and the fact that she was



not able to reconstruct all the different writing exercises that we did: we did too much, as we had been told more explicitly in Bicocca.

As with drawing, I have not written fiction for years, so I did not find this exercise particularly easy. This is doubtless having an impact on my recollection.

Kate, report on the second session, 24/03/2015.

Kate singled out the piece of writing on the river and the reading aloud of the texts during the composition as the activities that had proved the most meaningful for her.

Although in my academic life I am – of necessity! – a habitual writer, I find that our art work and creative writing are at the forefront of my recollections of the day.

From an initially playful exercise, we had created something that felt more profound.

This is doubtless having an impact on my recollection.

... the pieces reflected the many facets of learning, from our very first steps (learning to read), through educational and job-related vignettes.

... learning from other people ...

Fragments chosen by the participants from Kate's report on the second session, 28/03/2015.

There seemed to be some thinking going on in the group about the use of aesthetic languages to access different facets and depths of knowing.

### **3) Third step: Individuation**

#### *Activities*

After the group had chosen their metaphor of knowledge cards (Fabbri and Munari, 2010) and read their written accounts of them to one another, we decided to read out the descriptions of their chosen metaphors from the book (Appendix n. 1). The *assemblage* activity captured the attention of the participants, who played at constructing their own metaphors of knowledge in deep silence. Given the small size of the group, we decided to lay out a circle on the ground with the recycled materials, using it symbolically to offer a 'holding' environment. Later, during the poetry readings and for final conversation, we arranged the chairs in a small circle so as to be closer together.



Fig. 33 Participants choosing their metaphors of knowledge, CCCU, 28/03/2015.

Fig. 34 Producing the *assemblages*, CCCU, 28/03/2015.

### *Final conversation*

Similarly to what had happened in Bicocca, the participants now seemed more at ease with the kind of research work that we were carrying out together; they were also more inclined to draw on their aesthetic representations when talking to each other and this was helping them to make sense of key practices that they implemented in their work.

Annabel: ... I've also written down connectedness and separateness. And I think for me it's about being aware of the way I connect with things ... but also the separateness as well, that means that I have to create and maintain some boundaries ...

Gaia: This element of containment was coming out in both of your works. You also were speaking the word "containment" ...

Annabel: Yes, and your ... entrance [made of cogs] into that enclosed space, it's a bit of a tight squeeze isn't it? Could be uncomfortable [smiles].

Ailsa: How do I put it? ... I didn't want it to be a part of... but you needed to negotiate through to get into it..

Annabel: It had to be there.

Gaia: It's like a point of negotiation into this mechanism?

Ailsa: Yeah. Maybe that's the trusting that I meant as well, you know, if you can manoeuvre through.

Recorded final conversation, CCCU, 28/03/2015.

The conversation was humorous. Kate and Dilbert offered an example of how they could now negotiate who they were in the group and experiment with different strategies for presenting themselves in public and communicating what they were thinking and feeling.

Kate: It's about having the confidence really isn't it, to break through and take a step.

Annabel: It is like your staircase into your labyrinth [group smiles].

Kate: I need a drink [group laughs] [group jokes and laughs].

Ailsa: ...- You've not said a lot Dilbert [group smiles].

Dilbert: No, I've been listening, I've been listening. I try not to talk all the time. It is a temptation but I do resist [smiling] ... I've kind of written mine out. Can I read it out, is that all right? Because it makes more sense if I put it down, or I'll lose the thread.

Recorded final conversation, CCCU, 28/03/2015.

The long conversation that followed seemed to be addressed to Francesco and me as though to explain to us how the education system works in the UK and why the participants were so concerned about it. I intervened at one point to bring them back to their use of knowledge in professional practice, to get them to tell some autobiographical stories. I was increasingly enjoying the work, as I felt that I was now thinking with the group and with Francesco.

Annabel: ... But, you know, there's complete obsession with [overlapping] putting people, putting them in categories.

Ailsa: And they lose the enjoyment of learning.

Dilbert: It also worryingly shows that the teacher isn't even really understanding what they're doing.

Gaia: Yeah. Then the question could be about their own learning.

Dilbert: Yeah, absolutely this is partly..

Gaia: Shifting perspective ... I was thinking now about this relationship that we are exploring between, let's say, positive knowledge in the different professions and how we make use of that knowledge ... So, if we link our ways of knowing to our ways of using our knowledge of our field, this is the discussion about teachers ... or about other professions... the question becomes, what do we do with that in relating to others or in our actions..

Francesco: Is there any information about this from the work that we have done today, in your own specific experience?

Recorded final conversation, CCCU, 28/03/2015.

This direction seemed to facilitate the group in working out a better understanding of the links between macro systems of knowledge in their field, their own beliefs and models (such as a 'humanistic tradition of counselling'), and how they personally experienced knowing within these.

Dilbert: ... Now I've found myself conflicted [hmm] between encouraging them to develop modes of learning that enable this process to occur, and modes of learning that enable

somebody who is watching this process to see exactly what is happening and to reflect the progress in every ten minutes of the lesson and so on ... and of course the logic of that isn't necessarily knowledge per se, it's "performance".

Recorded final conversation, CCCU, 28/03/2015.

### *Report by Dilbert*

In his report, Dilbert made sense of the methodology used in the session and systematized it in terms of the cognitive actions underpinning each activity. Step by step, he built up to conveying the bewilderment experienced by the group when presented with the recycled materials and required to engage in poetic writing.

We arrived back from our break to a vast array of cloth, wire, nuts and bolts, a variety of textures and materials in assorted shapes and sizes. It was very colourful and a tad bemusing! The group was allocated boards upon which it could begin to construct a representation of the process of knowledge in 3D. A reasonable request!

The notion of personifying a meeting with an objectified representation of our own ideas, as if for the first time, was effective in forcing us into a deeper consideration of what we had created. The shared responses were illuminating and unique, especially when developed to reflect upon aspects of our own profession ...

We were encouraged to write a poem (in a heart-wrenchingly small amount of time!)

Dilbert, report on the third session, 17/04/2015.

Some ironic comments (such as the quip 'a reasonable request!') seemed directed at Francesco and I as facilitators, with a view to conveying how unusual and possibly 'embarrassing' our invitations were. I felt that I could pick up a sense of excitement and worry about being exposed to unfamiliar tasks, but also a great sense of satisfaction. Dilbert's growing sense of how other ways of knowing might be integrated was beautifully expressed in a passage in which he recalled playing as a child. The phrase 'inadequate representations' prompted me to reflect about academic models of knowing, which often impede, or fail to care for, the dimension of play.

I was reminded of my childhood days ... of the inevitable tank invasion. It was inevitable because my toy collection extended to one tank. The immediacy of the moment when my ideas came alive through the inadequate representations available to me returned, and I found myself, upon the floor, constructing a 3D representation with great care.

Dilbert, report on the third session, 17/04/2015.

In keeping with the overall tenure of Dilbert's report, the group chose fragments that summed up the research methodology, as though they were working to make it their own, and several members shared his assessment that 'the process, and those that had gone before, had enabled all of us to think about the topic in fresh and original ways'.

The participants were learning to play with knowledge, and hence developing new ways of exploring what may be viewed as scientifically valid or adequate or original knowledge in research, based on living out their knowing in all its pleasure and riskiness.

#### **4) Fourth step: Desire**

##### *Initial Conversation*

After reading the report by Dilbert, a short group conversation confirmed the potential deeper connections with knowing, at odds however with normative representations of the identity and approach to knowledge of a grown-up and professional that were continuing to surface.

Dilbert: And it was so immediate and powerful ... you've reconnected me with something that I had lost [hmm] [f hmm]. And reconnected me with something much more powerful than I was used to, because I was taking a very traditional stance towards things, a stance that I had habitually got into ...

Francesco: More mediated by time, by... childhood is all in space, adulthood is all in time in a way. Because a child doesn't feel ... time, in Piagetian theory he is very... about 5-6 years old. So the connection with materials is very profound because..

Vanessa: I think I am arrested at about 5 years old [group laughs].

Francesco: So do I, so do I.

Vanessa: But literally, I mean, I was on the floor touch-feeling things, and if I didn't like the feeling I wouldn't use it. And some stuff I wouldn't even touch because I just didn't like the look of it, so I was really into that.

Dilbert: That's very profound engagement though, isn't it?

Vanessa: I know. But it's a bit rubbish when you're trying to "do academia" and "being grown up", I need to kind of like [mimes closing her body into a bag with a zipper].

Recorded initial conversation, CCCU, 18/04/2015.

The group was building on reflections from previous sessions concerning taken-for-granted formulae of validity, habits of knowing, the status of the academic tribe, idealizations and judgmental feelings.

We now attempted to explore the **crossover** between subjective and objective knowing, as the participants discovered that, in their diverse professional fields, they had all experienced restrictive 'boxes', both in the system and in their own minds.

Vanessa: But what's really lovely for me being here – although I feel a bit intimidated when I read something like this because it's very cognitive, let's say, it's kind of my aim –, but it's lovely to um to be with people who... and to see the crossover, you know, to see where I can cross over ... 'cause there's room for both.

Dilbert: Well we both, yeah absolutely I totally agree with that, and I think we do live that dualistic approach, we... I think overtly, and perhaps for reasons of assessment, organization, and so on and so forth, value the cognitive within this realm. And yet within personal lives [hmm], within love or relationships, we value the affective and the embodiment, totally above anything else [f hmm]. And we have this dualism in our lives, don't we?

Recorded initial conversation, CCCU, 18/04/2015.

I tried to help the group to pursue this line of inquiry further by listening to their stories and suggesting new perspectives to encourage fresh spiralling.

Kate: A lot of the work that we do in career counselling is about taking people through that sort of journey, I think, and they quite often don't want to, they want to be told how to get to an end ...

Francesco: It's not a waste of time I think. It's gaining time.

Kate: Yeah, it's quite hard to get them to see it like that most of the time.

...

Gaia: How much time do you have?

Kate: It depends on where you're working, but typically 30 minutes.

Francesco: 30 minutes?

Vanessa: With someone brand new?

...

Gaia: ... you need to find ways [of accomplishing] your work, so it is always a matter of negotiating with institutional contexts... of survival ultimately. So, it is a matter of finding good ways, good enough ways for us to do what we can in 30 minutes, for example ...

Ailsa: Yeah, I mean it made me think as well ... about human warmth and maybe people with dementia ...

Recorded initial conversation, CCCU, 18/04/2015.

### *Activities*

We invited some of the participants to read aloud the text by J.L. Borges in English (see Appendix n. 5). It was beautiful and while listening I felt perhaps for the first time that we were foreign here. The words had unknown connotations, the sounds were 'other', and for a moment we were completely in the participants' hands. I suddenly appreciated the effort that

they were continuously making to try to understand us, just as much as we were challenged to understand them; engaging with one another entailed co-operating, from our embedded and embodied positions as knowers. We went on to the individual reflection on the text, followed by conversation and drawing. When we reconvened in a small circle, our conversation seemed to have become intimate and deeply reciprocal, or as I have tried to call it following Formenti (1998), more authentic.



Fig. 35 Presentation of the portrait of the mentor, CCCU, 18/04/2015.



Fig. 36 Reading and final conversation, CCCU, 18/04/2015.

### *Final Conversation*

Similarly to the group in Bicocca, the participants presented their portraits of the mentor to the others in the group with great care, sometimes keeping them close to their bodies as in the first picture above or placing them in the middle of the space created by the circle of chairs where other members of the group pointed to them, asked questions, and assisted in interpreting them. Each of these aesthetic works appeared to metaphorically express both personal and professional dimensions of its author's relationship with knowing and the other. These presentations of self via the mentor revealed desires and needs, fears of chaos, and the importance to being seen and mirrored in order to feel capable of knowing.

### *Report by Vanessa*

Vanessa's account of her understanding of the research process helped me to see more clearly how individuality may be experienced within the collective mind. Vanessa described the role of facilitators as providing a 'safe enough' research space (Winnicott, 1971), while themselves undergoing an autobiographical process of transformation.

Because I had missed the previous session, I was coming in to complete some of the exercises I had missed. I am always struck by the care and thoughtfulness of Gaia and Francesco when they are presenting and facilitating work and how they each bring something of themselves to what is really a very personal process for each individual in the group. And ultimately for the group collectively.

Vanessa, report on the fourth session, 29/04/2015.

The form of her diary was for me the most notable expression of her personal contribution to the research and her voice, which had been more tentative and self-protecting at the beginning. She opened the report with a photo of her own copy of the Borges story, on which she had doodled the profile of a woman without arms. She had given this impromptu sketch a caption drawn from the story, adding a question mark: ‘In the dreamer’s dream, the dreamed one awoke’ (?).

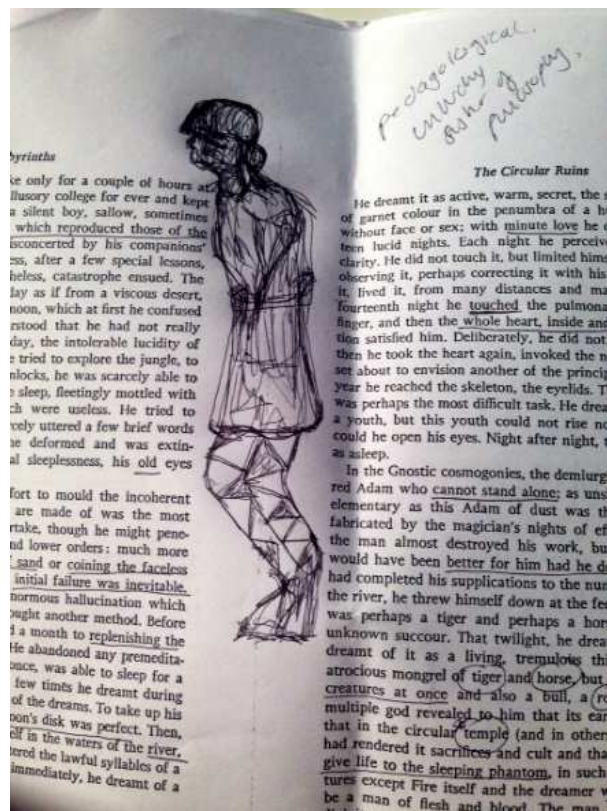


Fig. 37 Doodle, in Vanessa’s report on the fourth session, 29/04/2015.

The reader will remember that also Giacomo in Bicocca had included an ‘object’ in his report of the fourth session. This surprised me greatly! Were the two groups flowing through similar stages in a process of both self-integration (Winnicott, 1965) and collectively learning a language of holistic inquiry (Heron, 1996)? In relation to the mysterious woman, Vanessa wrote:



For me it was about something powerful and dreamlike. Like a discovery of something other. I doodled this girl who has her head turned away and I notice has no arms. Goodness knows what this might mean! She is wedged between pages 74 and 75 and deep in reverie.

Vanessa, report on the fourth session, 29/04/2015.

The spontaneously doodled figure seemed to breach the Borges text with a female reverie, offering in the context of the report an evocation of alternative ways of knowing that tap into the unconscious. The participants underlined fragments that, taken together, suggested a more integrated theory of knowing, a sensuous experience that allows space for not knowing and emotion.

... reading aloud which was powerful.

Goodness knows what this might mean!

Each work was entirely different and yet, interestingly, seen together as a whole, gave an integrated overview ...

This further deepening of the process unwrapped more meaning and emotion.

Fragments chosen by participants from Vanessa's report on the fourth session, 16/05/2015.

## **5) Fifth step: 'Playing'**

### *Activities*

After such a successful day, my co-facilitator and I were not prepared for the obstacles we came up against during the intensive weekend. When we met at the end of May, all participants were present and we invited them to orally narrate their learning biographies from inside the country map of the UK, which they seemed to enjoy.

But from Sunday onwards, attendance was disrupted, forcing us to continuously rearrange the programme to adapt, given that the activities that we had planned were all interconnected. We omitted the final theatrical *mise en scène* as we deemed that it was asking too much of this group.



Fig. 38 Theatrical warm up, CCCU, 16/05/2015.



Fig. 39 Role-play, CCCU, 17/05/2015.

The most evident embarrassment occurred on the Saturday morning in the lead up to the theatrical improvisation activity, when Francesco had some difficulty in instructing the group through English to carry out physical and expressive work with the body – he seemed lost without an adequate vocabulary, as though he mostly relied on words to provide direction. I was surprised that he was not so ‘expert’ anymore. I tried to intervene but our efforts were not coordinated enough to be effective. Nevertheless, this incident brought about a rebalancing in our facilitation (see Chapter Ten). Luckily, our choice of film – Yaron Zilberman’s *A Late Quartet* – was popular with the group (despite the fact that several of the participants were not particularly interested in cinema); I now wonder how much this preoccupation with pleasing the group spoke about my anxiety to be ‘good’, and Francesco’s also. The weekend closed with no final conversation, given that after Kate left we had only three participants. It felt truncated, especially in comparison to the climax in *Biccoca* – again, the desire to ‘please’. What could we learn from this? By email, some of the participants explained that they had found it difficult to balance the intensive weekend with family arrangements – possibly the boundaries between private and professional lives are more clearly defined in the UK; some also wrote that performing made them feel uncomfortable, although it was also positive and fun. Dilbert’s contribution on the Sunday, as a male gendered interpretation of professional action, was greatly missed by the participants and by us.

#### *Report by Ailsa*

Reading Ailsa’s report gave me greater insight into how surprising the methodology used on the weekend had been for some. I was also reassured that I had been worrying too much and that in the end, with the help of the group, we had been able to construct something meaningful for these people...

So, it's my turn to reflect on my experience of what was an intensive and exhaustive weekend but one that I think pushed me (kicking and screaming) to another level of learning experience.

Ailsa, report on the intensive weekend session, 10/06/2015.

However, my viewing the outcomes as due to our own successful work as facilitators still evoked the 'good formateur' in me, in control, and affirming herself through others – which made sense in relation to my autobiographical roots of knowing (see Chapter Three). Ailsa helped me to more authentically re-position in relation to the co-operative methodology that we were implementing: cooperative enquiry is co-constructed and the outcomes depend on the meaning attributed to it by all the participants.

Ailsa was open about feeling uncomfortable with being put on stage, but she reported that the storytelling inside the map had given her the inspiration of an 'outside in – inside out' model of learning, which she metaphorically described as '**footprints**'. This idea was taken up by others later, when reading the report during the follow up.

I was left with a sense of learning which I have named 'outside in- inside out' because it resonated with me... Footprints: learning biographies inside and outside of the map, also the process of looking inward at the personal and outward at the interpersonal.

Ailsa, report on the intensive weekend session, 10/06/2015.

The warm-up and improvisation activities (representational knowing), which for Francesco and myself had been such a moment of uncertainty and fragility, for Ailsa in contrast had meant a 'good enough' experience of unblocking the expressive potential of the body, as she described.

I had forgotten how to play imaginatively with my physical body/being, using it *as an instrument of expression*. The movement that was created caused a shift, I noticed strength and vulnerability. I had to "let go" of my uppermost feeling, which was "I feel like a prat and I am being watched", to one of a feeling of "just be" in the moment and do what feels natural.

Ailsa, report on the intensive weekend session, 10/06/2015.

Participants selected this feeling of 'just be' as a meaningful fragment, along with others that together conveyed a new questioning about the professional self in action that the weekend had produced. The question asked in the report was: To what extent are we used to playing with our bodies, our intuition, our emotions? Is the body just a vehicle for carrying around our head?

... the distance between our places of learning got smaller with time...

outside in – inside out

... “just be” in the moment and do what feels natural.

The question I’m left with, has my body become a transportation vehicle for my head...

Make space to listen, stillness of body and mind

Fragments chosen by participants in Ailsa’s report on the fourth session, 13/06/2015.

The report closed with a drawing of Ailsa’s developing understanding of herself as a professional, which involved connecting inner and outer spaces, and becoming more comfortable with silence in order to allow the other to enter the relational space.

## **6) Final session and follow-up**

The participants became reflexive about the entire research process, working in two smaller groups to produce two local theories – which I outline in detail in the next chapter – in response to the research question. In the conversation that followed, the participants spoke together both reflectively and reflexively, using humour to introduce alternative points of view and to draw attention to paradoxes and concealed habits. They had moved far from the elevated academic discourses that had characterised the early session, now drawing on their personal experience and professional knowledge to reveal additional facets of knowing and professional selves – as will be further illustrated in the extracts supplied in Chapter Eight. Francesco and myself asked questions and proposed interpretations and I felt very engaged and comfortable. Francesco spoke about how he had experienced the research process and the uncomfortable incident with directing expressive work in a different context; and I shared my experience of deep growth and nourishment. Reading back over my long comment now, I see that I was already beginning to develop my analysis and representation of the research work, and I remember how important it felt for me to communicate this to the group, as though I could be heard in this ‘space’ and wanted to present myself ‘truthfully’ at that point in the process.

Gaia: I started to be able to look back ... and I realized how much my relationship with this work with you and the other group had transformed ... It is an interesting connection between inhabiting an outside world together in certain ways and coming back to an inside world in some different way ...

Vanessa: How will you capture this in your PhD?

Annabel: Is it emerging Gaia?

Gaia: I think the whole three years of working with a question is a process in itself, so I think it's emerging, it is kind of moulding into how I can think and relate to the question now ... I don't think it can only be text. I think I need to find other ways.

Recorded final conversation, CCCU, 13/06/2015.

When we met again on 24 November for the follow-up meeting, there was the same sense of being a group and of pleasure in reuniting, and so we flowed through the conversations as a 'we'. The group produced a final conversation that concluded the inquiry.

### **Summary**

As in the Bicocca case study, in this chapter I gathered clues of the emergence of a 'collective mind' in the CCCU cooperative inquiry group, by which I mean a shared and satisfying way of languaging and co-ordinating our research activity. The discussion was therefore punctuated by metaphorical images (cold shell vs. womb-like/hostile conditions for creation, academic tribe/exclusion, flowing river/co-operative process, crossover/subjective-objective, footprints/personal-interpersonal). However, the most fruitful material that emerged from the inquiry process concerned moments of crisis.

I observed the group in Canterbury – a mixed group of academics and practitioners – working through 'embarrassments' on inclusivity, permeability to other ways of knowing, uncertainty, unknowing what seemed to be known (discourses), power relations, and the integration of parts of the self through spiralling. The participants and facilitators *lived out* these issues in the course of crises and 'polite' conflict (expressed through irony and absences); the fact that Francesco and I were foreign was key to encouraging the group (and us) to modify or even abandon some of the usual power structures, given that the facilitation was more uncertain and the overturning of roles more feasible.

### *Embarrassments*

The reflective diaries flagged with ironical comments when things had become too much and uncomfortable for participants. Other crises happened on the spot and required rapid adaptation on our part as facilitators. I here summarize the main moments of embarrassment with similar 'healthy' irony:

- *What do you want from me?* Confusion about what kind of 'research' we were inviting the participants to undertake with us: the group seemed divided between traditional academic conversation and a more inclusive and uncertain process (first day);

- *This is too much!* The diaries flagged the need to take more time and to care for participants' sense of anxiety when asked to act in an unusual and creative way (reports on second and third day);
- *We are busy people!* Absences suggested that participants were juggling workplace and family commitments; there may be culturally significant differences between Italy and the UK in terms of role expectations and questions of identity (absences and report on the weekend);
- *Our bodies need more languaging!* Practicing movement, bodily self-expression, and perceiving the body occasioned difficulty and embarrassment (report on the weekend);
- *Gosh, we are no longer the expert and the student!* As facilitators, we realized that we could not direct the group, in English, as we had done in Bicocca, with Francesco as expert and me observing the expert at work (fifth day).

#### *Uncovering voice in research*

Having gone through another circle in the spiralling process of writing this dissertation, this time by narrating the story of the research conducted with the group in CCCU, I am in a position to add further reflections about what I have learned about co-operative inquiry and the 'collective mind'. All previous considerations about the uncertainty of the process still hold true. This same process in the Canterbury group threw up additional themes of diversity and inclusion, in relation to the other and to other forms of knowledge, helping participants to discover different ways of speaking and articulating their thinking and knowing.

Via a recursive process, this shift led to the development of more permeable selves among group members, enabling connections with non-professional areas of life and knowing, the past, and affectivity and sensuality in adulthood. In other words, Winnicott's ideas (1971, 1965) about a transitional space of negotiation of who we are, and of a possible integration of the self, may be used to think about this group, as I will illustrate through Vanessa's and Dilbert's stories in the next chapter.

The co-operative research setting reveals desires to know and not to know, to become and not to become who we say we want to become (a co-operative researcher, a listener, a creative professional, a facilitator, and so on). This question underpinned the inquiry of this group, in which peeling off strategies of 'hiding and performing' was key. Big discourses can be a rhetorical disguise, situating the enemy in 'the system', while the struggles inside lived experience are more nuanced than that, and the logics of the system can be deeply internalized in our own narrative construction of our professional selves.

Co-operative methodology entails constant questioning of power dynamics, making it an effective tool for questioning both participants' and facilitators' actions and construction of knowledge and identity. The use of aesthetic languages, by experiencing evocative objects (Bollas, 2009) in a novel way, and by translating our epistemology into theatrical practice, brings the body on the research scene, and with it the actions, the emotions, and ultimately that which is unknown and unconscious in our lived relationship with knowing. This second case study has helped me to further explore how aesthetic practice can inform, nourish, and even question the more traditional autobiographical practice of writing about oneself; and how this interaction of languages characterises a kind of transformative research with the potential to offer additional insight into professional learning, unveiling – as I claimed in the concluding remarks to Chapter Five – transitions through feelings of chaos and disorientation and deep work with less conscious dimensions of identity. Key learning for me from facilitating this group concerned the need to foster relationships that are both 'safe enough' and 'risky enough' to create space for profound insights, by constantly tuning in to and adjusting to the group and individual participants. Reciprocal care and active listening may be what keeps the group and its facilitators together, encouraging all those involved to keep on keeping on, in terms of making space for different and more authentic selves. Spiralling seems to me to expand possibilities of becoming within a relationship with others and knowledge, via a deep, challenging, disorienting, embodied, and enjoyable quest for the self.

## *Chapter Eight*

### **Knowing across art and reason: Vanessa's and Dilbert's experience**

At the earliest stage the True Self is the theoretical position from which come the spontaneous gesture and the personal idea. The spontaneous gesture is the True Self in action. Only the True Self can be creative and only the True Self can feel real. (Winnicott, 1965, p. 148)

#### **Introduction**

In this chapter, I return to the *micro* level, to explore how the co-operative research workshops were experienced by two of the participants in the Canterbury Christ Church University group, Vanessa and Dilbert. As with the Bicocca biographies selected for individual analysis, I have brought an auto/biographical approach (Merrill and West, 2009) to bear on the material produced by Vanessa and Dilbert during the research sessions, including their drawings, prose and poetic texts, and recorded conversation. This entailed 'intense immersion in transcripts and in listening to recordings as well as considering the auto/biographical resonance of particular stories' (ibid. p. 137). I again sought to enhance my reflexivity by sometimes re-presenting the material in poetic form, as a method of reflecting and refracting the material, and enabling embodied understandings, multiple interpretations, 'emotional presence of the writer [...] and work *jouissance*' (Richardson, 1997, p. 136). The chapter draws together 'data, interpretation, theory and process insights' (Merrill and West, 2009, p. 137), progressing towards a position of constructed knowledge by 'weaving together the strands of rational and emotive thought and integrating objective and subjective knowing' (Belenky *et al.*, 1986, p. 134). Again, given that this is an auto/biographical inquiry, I allow the participants to speak for themselves, through their own material and the poems composed by me with their words; insights about my own knowing and becoming emerge in the course of my interaction with their stories.<sup>115</sup>

As stated in Chapter Six, my general line of argument in this thesis is that professionals are often trapped inside narrow, and sometimes negative and self-limiting relationships with knowledge, and possibly also with expert knowers. Against this background, I set out here to analyse the changes undergone by some of the CCCU participants during the research workshops, in terms of uncovering stereotypes, composing archetypical relationships with knowing – insider/outsider, art/reason, experience/discourse –, and self-integration.

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<sup>115</sup> To clearly separate the different voices within the text, as in Chapter Six, I use italics to flag autobiographical insights into my own relationship with knowing and professional becoming, and special fonts to identify, on the one hand, participants' voices – whether in speech or text – and on the other, my own poetic re-presentations of their words (Richardson, 1997).



**Vanessa** was an art psychotherapist working both for public mental health services and in her own private practice. She was also an artist who explored existential and transpersonal themes. She had participated in a project on feminism at CCCU but had never worked in or with the university, which perhaps explains her feeling out of place in an academic research environment. She came to higher education as an adult learner; perhaps what attracted her to the project was the opportunity it offered to access academic language through ‘a friendly door’. Her familiarity with self-expression and not knowing made me curious, as well as her ‘outsider’ resistance to self-validating academic talk.

**Dilbert** was a Senior Lecturer in Education. He had previously been Head of Languages at a local school, and had spent a long time teaching the visual and performing arts, but also had academic qualifications in Philosophy and Modern Literature. I was curious about his contrasting interests and his controlled way, in the early stages of the research process, of speaking about his experience almost as though he were reproducing the academic discourse about education. This reminded me of Francesco’s initial assertiveness; *but Dilbert also mirrored my own way, at times, of speaking in abstract terms instead of putting myself into what I say*. I drew the pseudonym Dilbert from a comic strip about office life, which provides an ironical view of the protagonist’s efforts to survive corporate culture and the logic of egotism.

Overall, it seemed to me that, following her initial discomfort, Vanessa learnt to present herself more easily in a normative, sometimes conservative, academic context, and to express her own self and knowledge more playfully. Dilbert on the other hand learnt to embrace his feelings and emotions as part of his academic persona and to tolerate not knowing with greater self-irony; this also meant that he was better equipped to engage with and offer a held space to others whose ways of knowing were different to his own (possibly) preferred intellectual mode. Vanessa’s and Dilbert’s processes of transformation in relation to knowing point up aspects of self-construction that might be applicable to education professionals more generally.

### **1) Roots in the familiar**

On the first day, the participants wrote individually about an image that was evocative of their professional selves and, via a further process of reflection, of their personal roots of knowing. The image chosen by Vanessa showed two chairs in front of a large window looking out onto a tree-lined natural landscape. There is no human presence in this picture, whose prevailing colour is a dreamy blue, creating an atmosphere that is peaceful and meditative – almost unnaturally so. For Vanessa – and for me –, this image represented an inviting place in which to sit and talk with another person.

Fig. 40 Image of the professional self chosen by Vanessa, CCCU, 24/01/2015.



In the afternoon, the participants were invited to compose poems in pairs. Vanessa's poetic composition was entitled 'Roots/Routes'.

#### ROOTS/ROUTES

The first thing that comes to mind is that I was born with all the knowing I need  
Embodied sense of knowing  
Knowing – Roots – go up and down – nourish, are a part of  
Routes – take us to something  
A light shone into or onto the dark, an en-lightening  
Route/root takes me  
I am knowing – because without me to reflect/understand/seek the knowledge  
There is no knowing. Knowledge does not know me

Light and dark and shades of grey  
Different viewpoints oppose or validate  
Rooted  
Lived experience  
Have all the knowing  
Written – read – lost  
Find in another time  
Possibility  
Invite others  
Simply by being other  
Rooted in the self  
Sources  
Look  
Comprehend  
My self and identity  
To further my journey  
And I can only do this  
From the limits/range of my felt self  
Ancestors, family, their thoughts about knowledge  
Felt it unimportant  
Experience  
From living day to day lives  
limits.

Vanessa, poem on roots of knowing, CCCU, 25/08/2016.

This poem spoke about being and becoming. A beautiful play on words ('root', 'route') pointed up the paradoxical coexistence of identity and change, source, and flow. The intertwined nature of knowing and living was expressed in an increasing intensity of rhythm as the verses progressed. Starting from the embodied self, the poem led to the discovery of difference, hence of the other – generating a connected knowledge in which both self and other are present (Belenky *et al.*, 1986). Through the poem, Vanessa also uncovered difference between her own personal route and her family roots. Finally, she stated her personal epistemology of knowing/unknowing and individuation.

The image chosen by Dilbert was a lake with a house, a tree, and a human figure on a distant boat. The tree was reflected in the water.

Fig. 41 Image of the professional self chosen by Dilbert, CCCU, 24/01/2015.



Dilbert wrote the following poem, entitled 'Familiarity'.

#### FAMILIARITY

A

Repeated

Choice

To be

The breeze shapes a falling leaf

Refracted

Mysterious

Silent

Rhythmically resting

Isolated in the single gaze

Upon the mirror that captures

Sky in water and earth

Seeking, flat

Upon the surface

Revealed anew in the dark  
Deep  
Unnatural silence.

Dilbert, poem on roots of knowing, CCCU, 24/01/2015.

I was struck by the first stanza which could almost have stood alone as a quasi-haiku.<sup>116</sup> A sense of stillness or flatness pervaded the poem. Was the ‘mirror that captures’ a metaphor for knowing? Only silence could offer partial revelation, yet returning to his roots of knowing seemed to represent an unnatural and unfamiliar experience for the author. During the final conversation, Dilbert explained what he meant by familiarity.

Dilbert: So I think there are areas of experience that we reject because it doesn't fit with our narrative ... based on a set of values that we've come to, we've either inherited them or believe them implicitly ... or we are accumulating them based on what we feel has worked positively.

Recorded final conversation, CCCU, 24/01/2015.

Dilbert had a sound academic understanding of education as the critical and rational unearthing of and emancipation from preconceived assumptions, as we also saw in the previous chapter. He seemed unaware that he himself might be providing an example of *déplacement*: as earlier noted (see the section ‘First step: Chaos’ in Chapter Seven), the embarrassment with the other group of non-academics caused him to become confused about his rationale for joining the enquiry process – which was initially to acquire new methodological tools to use in his own EdD study... his own preconception, so to speak. This incident ultimately generated for the entire group the possibility of constructing knowledge through conversation in a less deterministic and less traditionally ‘academic’ way.

In the beginning, Vanessa spoke little, but made poignant and critical comments, often directed at Dilbert. She contributed a perspective on the professional self that was informed by the ethics of art therapy, in which the question of knowing is more nuanced.

Dilbert: ... [that we are professionals] depends on how this is related to the role, whether the role is subduing the self or the self has freedom within the role ...

Vanessa: Yeah but then it can be abused hugely..

Dilbert: Oh absolutely.

Vanessa: By people who call themselves professionals, and don't act professionally.

Recorded final conversation, CCCU, 24/01/2015.

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<sup>116</sup> A haiku is a three-line Japanese poem of seventeen syllables, written in a 5/7/5 syllable count. It originally developed as a breakaway tradition from longer oral poems in the sixteenth century, and was firmly established as a great form a century later by Matsuo Bashō (<https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/text/haiku-poetic-form>).

## 2) Speaking about impersonal knowledge

Vanessa's drawing of her river of learning was original, in that she came up with the idea of folding the paper to represent the different levels in her learning.

Fig. 42 Final composition of participants' rivers of learning, CCCU, 21/02/2015.



Given that Vanessa had not spontaneously contributed much to the conversation, I asked her about her drawing. She explained that she had represented her feeling of being present in the flow of life, in distinct layers that run simultaneously. She united process and meaning in her description, in which the symbolic appeared to be in dialogue with the more logical and propositional modes of psyche (Heron, 1992).

Vanessa: I feel that my learning is kind of starting now. It is not starting now, but the richness of the learning for me in my life is now; so it's like a treasure on the bottom, the fish is for creativity and these are just beautiful colours. It is about movement and flow ... so it is not a beginning and an end, it is flow. And these are like reflections of the sun and leaves and patterns you get on the water. And this is like a rainbow of just, I don't know, it is kind of gratitude, I think I feel gratitude for the opportunity to learn and to be in a flow. And it is

actually lovely to put them together and share that, because the whole is greater than the parts.

Recorded conversation on the rivers of learning, CCCU, 21/02/2015.

Long after the event, I composed my own poetic extract (Cupane, 2009) from the three pieces of writing produced by Vanessa that day: her description of the river, the epistemological piece on her learning biography and her autobiographical text. The title of my poem was that given by Vanessa herself to her drawing: 'Flow'.<sup>117</sup>

#### FLOW

I am a long river with no beginning and no end  
No name – no purpose  
I have travelled far  
I hold her and she knows  
Dancing ladies spread their skirts  
Shining colour, shape, temperature, smell, sight

With all these apparently technical words my river – flow feels stuck  
The pace is forced  
This is not their way but it is the way of society  
I do not learn well in this environment  
Because I miss important things that I need  
I have much learning that I have received.

Del Negro, poetic extract from the materials of Vanessa (Day 2), Milan, 25/08/2016.

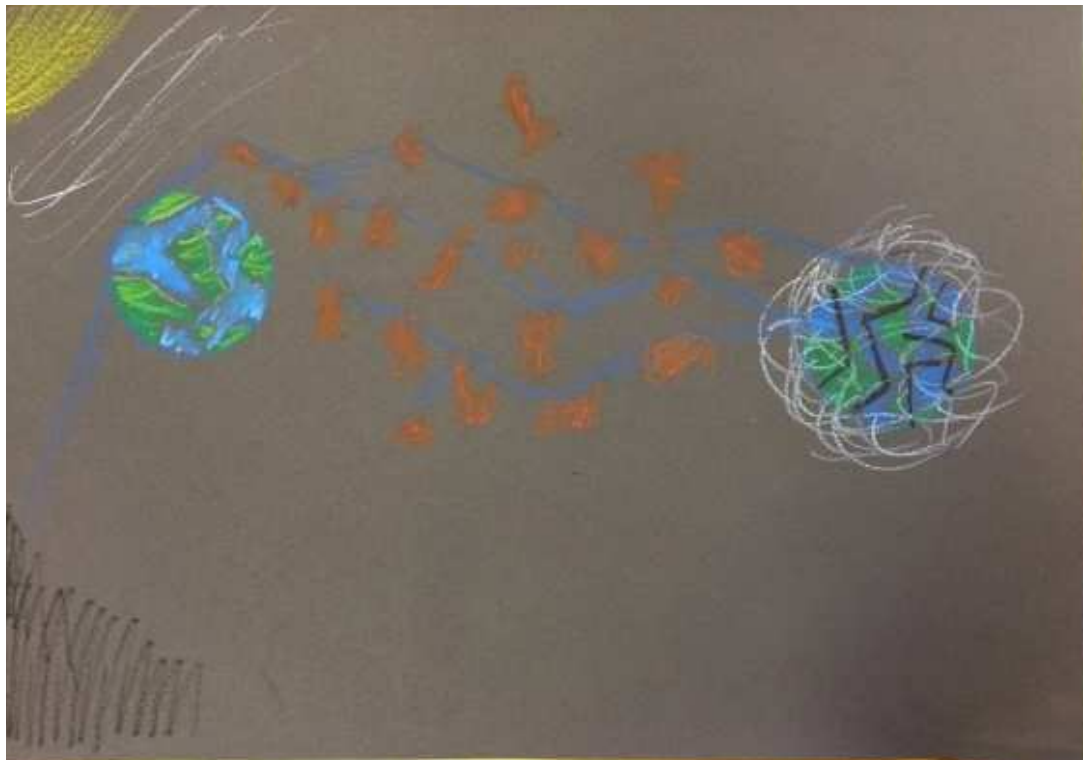
This poem spoke of a struggle. After an organic becoming – a sensuous surrender to unspeakable experience, rotation, circularity, and sensuality – Vanessa had been obliged to adopt other strategies in order to interact with a technical and rationalistic society. I did not know whether she was critical of the 'apparent' power of scientific language, or questioning her own mystification of it. I wondered if she had come here (into the lion's den) to re-examine the premises of her unsatisfying position at the margins of scientific discourse. I took the last line in the poem from the text she produced after working on her CV with a partner, which gave her a sense of being recognized 'in a positive, exciting, and validating way'. Dilbert was absent on the day, but met me at another time. He produced a drawing of his river of learning (see below), which he explained represented the fact that we live in uncertainty and confusion, but journey, by means of reason, towards an ideal of enlightenment (understood as the acquisition of true knowledge). To the bottom left of the drawing, he

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<sup>117</sup> For an example of my method of poetic extraction following Cupane (2009) see Appendix n. 6.

represented the abyss of disillusionment from which we may go back to living in the present moment and ‘rescue what we can’.

Fig. 43 Dilbert’s river of learning, CCCU, 26/02/2015.



This was a fully epistemological representation, practically a theory. Dilbert appeared to be in quite a difficult place to me, so I asked him where he saw himself. He replied using the impersonal ‘you’ form:

Gaia: Very interesting. And where are you in this picture?

Dilbert: I think you can be in all places at once here, you can be recognizing the dysfunctionality of your existence here, attempting a journey to something you might not quite believe in, but that means you also have no answers, this is your only possibility.

Recorded conversation on the rivers of learning, CCCU, 26/02/2015.

We had a long conversation that included discussing connections with the drawings of the other participants which I had brought with me. Dilbert suggested that his vision was different to that of the others because it featured neither a sense of direction and nor support, and his flow was at risk of sinking into ‘despair’. Why did this evoke Federico’s ‘infernal skein’ (see Chapter Five, *supra* p. 133) so strongly for me? I extracted parts of Dilbert’s written productions from the day, so as to develop a heightened perception of their meaning. The



extract came across as quite disillusioned. Because Dilbert himself had not given a name to his river, the poem is untitled.<sup>118</sup>

#### UNTITLED

I am the paradox that defines your existence  
An illusion of transparent capacity  
Filling you with uncertainty and falsehood

Experience, knowledge, understanding  
A particle in the sky  
No more, no less.

Del Negro, poetic extract from Dilbert's materials (Day 2), Milan, 25/08/2016.

### **3) Finding more optimistic views**

Vanessa was absent from the third session. Participants chose from Fabbri and Munari's (2010) metaphor of knowledge cards, and constructed their own representation of knowledge, which they then wrote about imaginatively.

Dilbert seemed to genuinely enjoy this activity and I remember him lying on the floor with the concentration of 'play' (Winnicott, 1971) while assembling his construction, which he called 'Technocrat'.

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<sup>118</sup> I used two texts: the imaginative piece on the river, and the epistemological text on his learning biography (see Chapter Four).

Fig. 44 Dilbert's *assemblage*, CCCU, 28/03/2016.



He read his text aloud with enjoyment. Did it refer to Dilbert himself, implying that he was at risk of becoming a technocrat?

My name is technocrat. I have a story of inevitability to tell. When Dilbert meets me he sees the crushing logic of consumerism in my illustration. The shining silver of my structure with its functionally fitting shape – purposeful, strident, dominating, strong, clear – contains, restrains, contextualizes the idiosyncratic splashes of colour that he is constantly searching for. He is so confused in the glaring clarity of his existence that he can barely see the wood of the trees.

Dilbert, imaginative writing on the *assemblage*, CCCU, 28/03/2016.

The course taken by Dilbert's thinking during this session illustrates how free associations may be generated by using evocative objects (Bollas, 2009) and how group conversation supports *déplacement*. After reading the texts aloud to one another, the participants shared

their reflections about their strategies in constructing their objects. Dilbert spoke of the tension he had encountered between cognitive and less conscious strategies.

Dilbert: I wasn't clear what I wanted to represent when I started ... I tried to just make something that was interesting to me in terms of shape ... then see if that suggested something to me as a whole ... It was a rather unusual journey for me, because, as we said earlier, we don't have time to play ... I am still working out whether I've made it fit with what I had in mind or whether what I had in mind came from what I've made. It's probably a bit of both. But I thought it was a very interesting illustration of some rather metaphysical ideas.

Ailsa: Yours is very methodical, you know?

Dilbert: ... I realized that I was boringly I felt just working in patterns ... And then I thought, well actually that's probably what I am trying to say ... that dominant way of thinking, I think is restrictive, and I think the windows for expressing alternative approaches, they already exist. And I feel very lucky that I've been able to be part of this type of approach, where we can explore those with time that we never give ourselves.

Recorded conversation on *assemblages*, CCCU, 28/03/2015.

In play, he found a solution to his dilemma, the insight that alternative approaches are already there. Later on in the conversation, he suggested that the temple in his construction might symbolize belief in a technocratic approach to knowing that takes the place of the divine. Bollas provides a useful framework here: 'there are shafts of interest that emerge directly from our unconscious lines of thought to seek out and find specific things in our world that are objects of interest' (Bollas, 2009, p. 83). Had Dilbert made a temple by chance? He himself was quite excited by this associative way of thinking in conversation:

Annabel: I looked across at some point and I thought you were building Stonehenge.

Dilbert: (laughs) I could have been, I am not sure I am..

Gaia: Yes.

Francesco: ... There is something about the social construction of time that frames experience for a community. And you started from the relationship between technocracy and consumerism, as a social construction of a form of understanding, of knowing, of experiencing.

Dilbert: Yes. I was thinking of the notion of containment ... the temple is a containment of knowledge isn't it, in the sense that it holds a belief, which is a very exclusive idea! Yes, that's very good actually.

Francesco: And also the notion of the relationship between human and divine.

Dilbert: Although this is denying the divine, by being very technological..

Gaia: Technological. ...-

When writing reflectively about what his *assemblage* revealed to him about his profession, Dilbert spoke about the commercialization of education and concluded by saying that ‘the drive for clarity ... gives people less time to establish fundamental foundations, leaving an empty awareness that lacks understanding’. His thinking seemed to have moved into more blurred areas. Surprisingly, a crow appeared in his poem about knowing, as a sort of mysterious sign of hope:

Growing with the untangling of the knots  
Finding the flow in the thing that seems  
And then flings itself into the pile of nos, nots, and nopes  
Hope emerges as the crow  
Curious crow source high from the intermingled chaos  
Shining strip against the dark coat  
Light reflecting brightly.

Dilbert, poem on knowing, CCCU, 28/03/2015.

As we saw in the previous chapter, Dilbert was now speaking about finding more optimistic views. In some reflective notes that he shared during the final conversation, he said that his view of knowledge was ‘idealized and to a degree romanticised’. The freedom ‘professed’ by the system was in fact manipulative. As against that, he maintained, we are here to ‘maintain those patches of colour that contain, in a unique subjectivity, the moments of discovery and insight that enable us to connect, grow and redefine’. He here seemed to have integrated insights from his aesthetic work (freedom, belief, colour) into his overarching epistemology, producing a new conceptualization of moments of discovery. Was he also referring to his current experience with ‘playing’?

Unluckily Vanessa was not present on this day. She attended a short separate session with Francesco and me, during which she chose her cards, made her *assemblage* and wrote about it. She described the constructive process in detail, bringing a reflexive approach to bear on her *modus operandi* (Fabbri and Munari, 1990).

Vanessa: When I used the word ‘leftovers’ I felt really, it really made me feel sad, and I realized that’s about lack of self-worth and it is like from my past, of not being encouraged to learn or know, you know, there wasn’t the support for that. Then I left school very young and... So it was kind of interesting to work with that and to make something of my own from leftovers [yeah] and then to value the leftovers ... and that’s about picking up knowledge and

things, which is what I kind of do I suppose and then I am making it my own by choosing what I hold on to.

Recorded conversation on Vanessa's *assemblage*, CCCU, 18/04/2015.

Vanessa's written account of how her *assemblage* represented her as a professional therapist yielded further insights: she too had made a sort of temple surrounded by small objects, which in relation to her profession represented how 'her life is a series of separate and whole events' out of which 'each one can be made, remade and dismantled', and viewed differently from different angles. As a therapist 'she can take a complex person, made up from different events/people/life stories and allow them to be in a variety of forms ... She can add and subtract from this, as the person or art material allows'. I was intrigued by the resonance between the two temples, the technocratic and the refracting temple, both also symbolizing to me the shadow of power in education (or therapy), and my own personal challenge: *how to become a 'good-enough' co-operative researcher and facilitator?*

#### **4) Recomposing parts of the self**

After our evocative reading of Borges' *Circular Ruins*, Vanessa was the first to share her 'sensuous' reading of the text; she was especially drawn to Borges' descriptions of physical qualities and states of awareness. She commented on these at length and with enthusiasm, describing her favourite passages as 'gorgeous' or 'cool'. The group listened with interest. I remember enjoying the diverse reactions stimulated by this difficult literary text that none of the participants found off-putting.

As the conversation progressed, Dilbert began to speak about the illusory nature of knowing; the magician or mentor 'is recreating the body [of the other] in his own image because that's all he knows'. Vanessa questioned him about the accumulation of wisdom down through the generations, which Dilbert was sceptical about. He finally provided an autobiographical reading of his own sense of disillusionment, drawing a link with parenting. The two had a short dialogue in which Vanessa offered some holding.

Dilbert: ... we think we work out knowledge from areas of certainty and it is completely miserable. And on one hand you could make a link to Frankenstein and the terrific irresponsibility of creating a creature when you don't have any awareness of the divine ... And the rest of us that have children don't have any more idea that Frankenstein ... we have no idea what we are going to do with that child ... if I am really honest with myself when I had my son, no idea [smiles], no idea apart from love. So, incredibly irresponsible.

Gaia: Is there an alternative?

Dilbert: Well, we have to – as limited humans-, we have to have faith... faith in what? Oh my goodness. I am glad I had it then because I would never have it now. [...]

Vanessa: It [the text] says “all fathers are interested in the children they have procreated (they have permitted to exist) in mere confusion or pleasure”. I am a woman and I feel the same about bringing children into the world, probably confusion and pleasure.

Dilbert: Yes that is very true.

Recorded conversation on the text of Borges, CCCU, 18/04/2015.

Next came a sort of crisis – both epistemological and emotional.

Dilbert: ... to have our lives revealed as phantomed, as not being formed from free will, as being shaped by others who don't know what they're doing. As many of the concrete things around us that we relate to not really existing in the way that we think they do if they exist at all. To have that level of illusion revealed is paralyzing. How can then we operate within that?

Vanessa: Oh no I think it frees us.

Dilbert: Well free to what? What can you then establish, what can you then substantiate? How can you operate when you have nothing to relate to?

Recorded conversation on the text of Borges, CCCU, 18/04/2015.

Dilbert's problem of not knowing was now 'paralyzing' him, and he reacted strongly to the alternative perspective offered by Vanessa. A clash was taking place between two archetypes of knowing: I asked myself what sort of new 'self' composition would take place.

Unexpectedly, the dialogue was 'good enough' to facilitate the participants in bringing different parts of the self onto the scene.

Vanessa was the first to present her portrait of the mentor:

Fig. 45 Vanessa's portrait of the mentor, CCCU, 18/04/2015.



She is ambiguous

Light

Dark

Mysterious

Transporting

Holding

Rejecting

Enlightened

Shut

Opaque

Vanessa's WAY on the mentor, CCCU, 18/04/2015.

The shape in the lower part of the drawing represented finger puppets and – as in a sort of theatre of the self – different aspects of inner life which could only be encountered in a context of trust (a 'safe enough' relationship, Winnicott, 1971). Vanessa was now fully drawing on her professional knowledge in arts therapy to connect the personal with the professional; the group, and especially Dilbert, supported her in this. She told a story of her confusing desire for a mentor.

Vanessa: ... it makes me think of ... finger puppets where each finger was a different person ... and I think my mentors have just been critical or complicated ... it feels ... that I am my own mentor, but not very good at it ... I haven't really been in education in the sense of some of you ... So maybe I should look for a mentor. I had one person in mind ... she was great but she was really dark ... I also wondered whether it goes back to attachment styles, because my attachment is kind of non-existent there ... so you can see my experience of mentoring is ... very confusing.

Gaia: So these different characters are different sides of the same person, yes?

Vanessa: Yes, and different sides of me, in the sense that to be able to form a connection with the mentor requires trust. And perhaps ... I haven't been able to form that ... I had to kind of 'do it yourself', really.

Dilbert: That captures it really well. The turbulence is really strong in the image.

Ailsa: And the fragmentation..

Dilbert: Very powerful.

Recorded presentation of the portrait of the mentor by Vanessa, CCCU, 18/04/2015.

Although she began by saying that she had no mentor, Vanessa then wrote about someone whom she came to realize, through narration (Sclater, 2004), had been a mentor to her when she was a schoolgirl.

Vanessa: I'll start. When I was about twelve maybe, I had an English teacher ... I think perhaps because I was starved of family affection, this mentorship became clouded by emotion... I wrote masses and she marked often. I was always thrilled to get her feedback. I was called Teacher's Pet and it was a double-edged sword ... I wonder, was her need to satisfy and stay with my need? ... There was a sense of schoolgirl crush about this, the muddying of the waters of growth ... I'm grateful to this woman who had [sighs]... who had a nervous breakdown during her teaching years and married her doctor. The frailty of humanity has many sides of suppressed darkness ... Yeah, I suppose that was my mentor really.

Recorded story of an episode with the mentor by Vanessa, CCCU, 18/04/2015.

The relationship described by Vanessa had been ambiguous and exposed her to the desires and frailties of adult relationships: could this be a root of her therapeutic profession and of her way of engaging with others to produce personal knowing?



In comparison with the more clear-cut stories of mentors produced by the other participants in this group, Vanessa and Dilbert seemed to offer more fragmented narratives. The following are Dilbert's portrait and WAY of the mentor figure:<sup>119</sup>

Fig. 46 Dilbert's portrait of the mentor, CCCU, 18/04/2015.



The mentor is calm/frantic

Aged

Opaque

Unsure

Floating

Consumed

Looking for assistance

Burnt

Trapped

Dilbert's WAY on the mentor, CCCU, 18/04/2015.

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<sup>119</sup> The WAY is a list of adjectives that I invited participants to draw up to help define the identity represented aesthetically in the drawing of the mentor (see the section 'Fourth Session' in Chapter Four).

The books in the drawing represented that which is ‘at the heart of learning in Western culture, caught up through the record of language and the referencing, and the body of knowledge that we have’. As the old man seeks answers ‘the knowledge starts to burn him ... and it is destroying him bit by bit’. The mentor (Dilbert?) is ‘setting himself on fire, by coming across knowledge that he can’t comprehend’, although he has to ‘perform’ as though he were all-knowing.

Dilbert: He is actually looking up [hmm hmm] for answers to the mentee as it were... sometimes we are ... expected to know, and we might feel we don’t have anything to say.

Recorded presentation of the portrait of the mentor by Dilbert, CCCU, 18/04/2015.

*I listened and asked myself auto/biographically: why does knowledge have to be painful, and why should an intellectual wish to hide from confusion?* Dilbert then told two stories of mentors from the two different halves of his life: one a professor and the other a boxer. Could a burning desire to embody knowledge have been expressed in the burning hands of the erudite man in the drawing?

Dilbert: ... I responded ... with two ... because I couldn’t decide ... Is it all right to do two?

Gaia: Sure.

Francesco: No problem.

Dilbert: All right. Professor Pearson ... He was a knowledgeable man with a love for life, particularly as represented by the language of literature ... I always had to come at it in my own way and I had issues with people at the university... not accepting that this was valid. I did philosophy and literature ... I had to do it when it was interesting to me or I couldn’t do it. Professor Pearson was – I feel now – good enough to be able to deal with that ... And as a result I developed an appreciation of the poetry of the courtly love code, particularly Petrarch [group smiles]. Not the one I would have chosen straight off! ... The other one, rather different ... Tony Raley, an Irish professional boxing coach based in London ... I moved to London to try and meet Tony ... In boxing terms he was erudite, succinct, and revolutionised my boxing style at the age of forty ... I now employ and have developed many of the techniques I learned from him in my own coaching ... He cut through in a way that I have never experienced before. And from that point on I have had a great deal of success..

Vanessa: Are you talking in life generally or boxing?

Dilbert: Boxing. No in life generally Tony wasn’t good at all ... Boxing is very difficult, is a very physical activity so ... you have to try and feel it, but you can only feel it if somebody shows you what to do to feel. So it’s quite an engaged, it is like dancing. Um so... he could see that ... I completely changed everything. From the feet up, everything ... it’s a skill that is very

important to me because it's sort of half of my life in a way ... So Professor Pearson and Tony Raley [smiles][group laughs].

Recorded story of an episode with the mentor by Dilbert, CCCU, 18/04/2015.

So, Dilbert was also a boxing coach! The dancing body of the boxer and the courtly love code seemed to metaphorically represent different forms of Dilbert's self. Only now did they emerge in an amused re-composition in the public space of the university (Winnicott, 1965), one 'coded' and one 'rough' – sensuous and sensual.

### **5) Making a transition into academic language**

During the conversation on the film *A Late Quartet*, Vanessa made some observations about the characters and identified with the new cello player, Nina, who came on at the end to take the place of Peter who was ill.

Vanessa: I was quite intrigued by Nina. She melts together and she has passion, she is kind of like the glue in a sense ... In terms of my career I guess it is that I come like at the end, when someone really needs therapy because their life has been ripped apart.

Annabel: And there's some putting back together.

Vanessa: Yes. It feels like having split it all over, it puts it together more strongly. You know sometimes you see those pictures of those beautiful gold bowls, a Japanese thing that when they break they put them back the most beautiful..

Annabel: They don't hide the mend. They make a feature of it.

Vanessa: Yes, that becomes the strength of it, the beauty of it.

Recorded conversation on the film *A Late Quartet*, CCCU, 17/05/2015.

The short dialogue between Vanessa and Annabel culminated in Vanessa recognizing, as an outcome of the co-operative inquiry process, the possibility for her to translate her experience and intuition into academic language.

Annabel: That's interesting because when you said about the bowl I was just thinking about Henry James then and *The Golden Bowl*<sup>120</sup> ... a metaphor for everything else that is going on, that is, that relationship breaking up ... the bowl itself is flawed, and that doesn't become apparent until later in the book.

Vanessa: The golden bowl?

Annabel: *The Golden Bowl*, Henry James. It is not light reading but I love Henry James ...

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<sup>120</sup> Henry James's (1904) *The Golden Bowl* labyrinthine novel revolves around a symbolic object that represents the adulterous relationships of two couples, and the recomposition of the fragments of a marriage.

Vanessa: I suppose what I am finding really interesting doing these workshops is um kind of learning the language of bringing in my experience, or whatever, into ... um ... giving it the learning experience or the jargon, linking ... I suppose bringing in ... something that I intuit, but learning the language of bringing it more into an educational context.

Recorded conversation on the film *A late quartet*, CCCU, 17/05/2015.

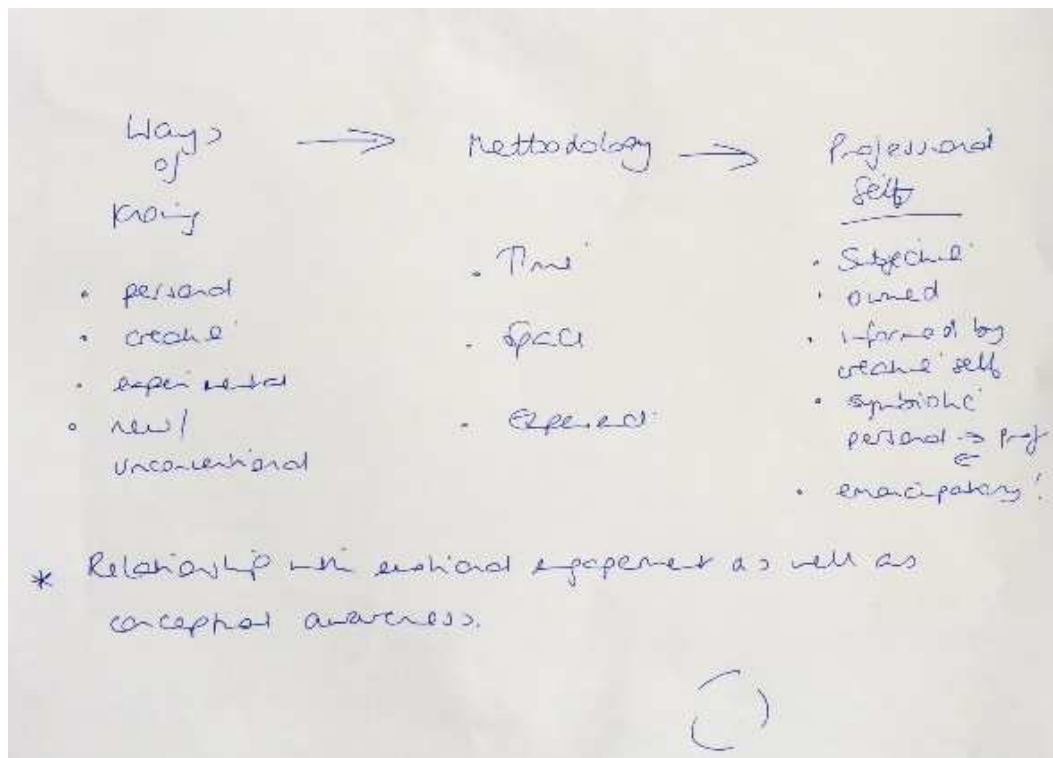
The research space seemed ‘good enough’ (Winnicott, 1971) to support Vanessa through such a transition, as for example when she asked for a literary reference to be explained by Annabel, who from the outset had presented herself as the child who lived in the world of books and later found her natural place in academia – *quite an intimidating persona for me, and perhaps for Vanessa too, at the start.*

### 5) Making space for the other

During the final session in June, the participants – working in two small groups – presented two theories that co-operatively attempted to answer to the research question about knowing and professional becoming in education. Dilbert and Annabel presented their respective groups’ theories, while the other participants added contents and comments that generated interesting dynamics in terms of a renegotiation of knowledge relations.

The group comprising Dilbert, Kate and Ailsa presented their conceptualization of a process with three areas: ways of knowing, methodology, and the professional self.

Fig. 47 Sketch of Group Theory 1, CCCU, 13/06/2015.



This group said that during the workshop they had researched the role of knowledge in their lives, in an unconventional time and space and using creative approaches; this experience had had deep effects on their understanding of the professional self, which they now saw as more informed by subjectivity. The long extract that follows illustrates how Dilbert was learning to provide a holding environment for others to express their ideas, and to make space for these ideas within a discourse that he valued.

Dilbert: Shall I lead it?

Kate: Yeah go on [...]

Dilbert: Now I make *others* speak all the time so [laughs]. Right, we've basically conceptualized this in terms of ... three main sort of areas ... the first one ... has been to explore different ways of knowing ...

Kate: Yeah. And we've been forced to try and make things concrete [Francesco smiles] [we all laugh].

Vanessa: That is not forcing! That is doing.

Dilbert: That's an important part of the methodology though, isn't it? I think as we played..

Kate: Out of our comfort zone.

Dilbert: Yes exactly. Yeah, yeah, stretching. And that, that physicality, that articulation through different means ... the visual, which for some people is very natural, for others is not quite so [smiles].

Kate: That's been the interesting dynamic in the group though, hasn't it?

Dilbert: Yeah, very much so yeah, yeah. So that's one of the ways we've been looking at different 'relationships' ... [that means] the conceptual understanding but also the very importance of what we're bringing in, this notion of emotional linking ... developing our sense of identity outside social conventional forms. So in terms of methodology, how we've gone about this? ... Time ... produced an experience in itself ... because we were in that space we hadn't had before ...

Kate: And also that relates to your silence.

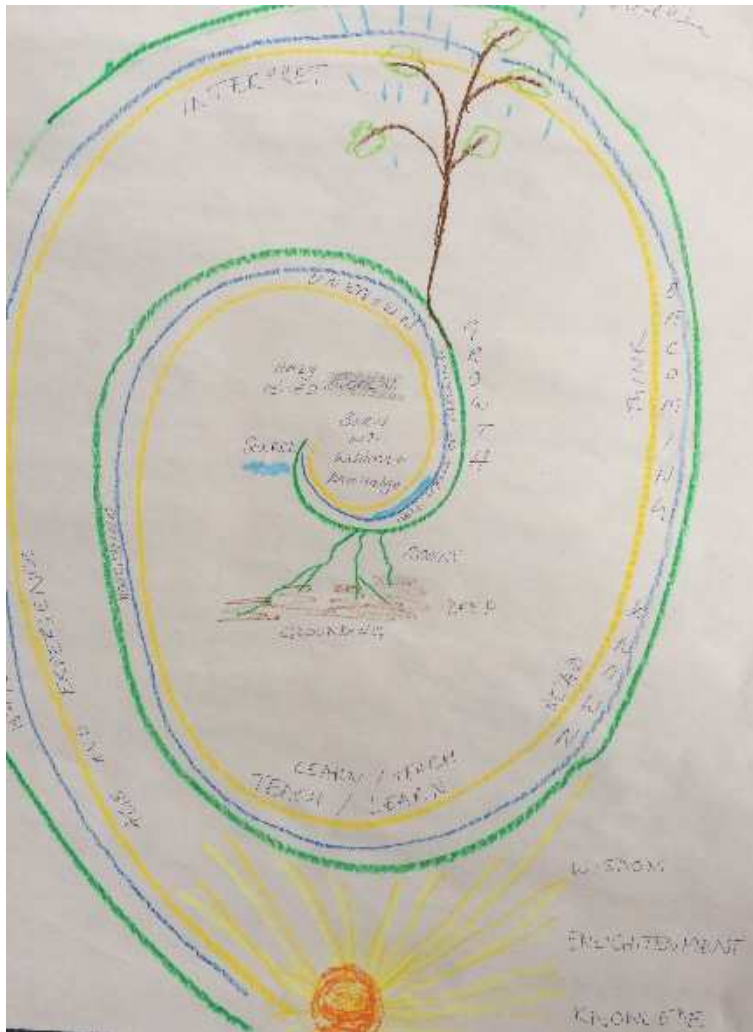
Dilbert: Absolutely yeah ... what's next? [handing over to Kate and Ailsa]

Recorded presentation of Group Theory 1, CCCU, 13/06/2015.

Vanessa's interaction with the group is a further point of interest; she was often the one who asked questions that led to a change in perspective.

The theory she constructed with Annabel was visually represented as a spiral of becoming.

Fig. 48 Picture of Group Theory 2, CCCU, 13/06/2015.



Vanessa added details to Annabel's description. A highly dynamic conversation ensued in which the whole group was engaged in an effort to make sense and access understanding.

Annabel: So it starts with something that Vanessa had written, that we are born with wisdom and knowledge, but it's hidden [hmm]. So we've got this veiled hidden hazy knowledge, but there's a source, which nourishes. So we've got the Enlightenment spiral, we've got the nourishment spi- and then the..

Vanessa: Nourishment is blue.

Annabel: Nourishment is blue. Enlightenment is yellow, and then green is growth, OK? So, very symbolic [with irony].

Francesco: [smiles] Really!

Vanessa: Very simple, very simple ...- It's kind of interesting, isn't it, that the sun is at the bottom [...]

Ailsa: Fire.

Vanessa: It does. It feels very warm, transmuting. It's changing something. [...]

Annabel: And then we have a “wellspring of knowing”, which is a phrase that we really loved, so we wanted to put that in there, alongside the unknown.

Recorded presentation of Group Theory 2, CCCU, 13/06/2015.

Later Dilbert twice asked Vanessa to expand on her belief in an inborn source of knowledge – as though he were trying out a new ‘object’ of thought (Merrill and West, 2009). Vanessa first described her epistemology, then her struggle to find an intuitive way of knowing that had not been there for her from the beginning. She claimed validity for her views and self.

Dilbert: What sort of knowledge were you thinking about?

Vanessa: More sacred really. It’s a bit more what you [Ailsa] are talking about really, it’s like a lineage of knowledge and for me, you know, the trans- whatever trans- trans- trans-transpersonal is very... but that’s just me. I mean, I am making..

Dilbert: Yeah. I was interested in all that.

Vanessa: Yeah. And I make absolutely no apologies for that, I don’t, that’s not ivory tower or anything to me. That is fundamentally, utterly fundamentally in there [...]

Gaia: Like that place of foggy knowledge, at the centre of the spiral. It actually needs some sun from the outside world to bloom..

Annabel: Break through [hmm].

Vanessa: I suppose my journey to this point has been a very very hard journey. I left education at sixteen, my parents didn’t believe in education and knowledge and all sorts of things. So I am sort of a self-taught person. So I haven’t got to this place, I’m not like in some Walhalla land and I think this is all kind and groovy and colourful. I think this is all real lived experience for me, so that it’s kind of valuable. It has not been easy to get to draw that picture for me.

Recorded final conversation, CCCU, 13/06/2015.

This conversation welcomed difference, allowed more authenticity in Vanessa’s relationship with the group, and constructed a richer understanding, for everybody in the group, of how questions of becoming were deeply embedded in the heart of their inquiry.

## **7) Challenging dualistic cultures of knowing**

We began the day with a conversation to gather our thoughts, in which the participants spoke about their struggles to use creativity in their work environments. Vanessa spoke about having broadened her views about what is possible to do within the constraints of the education system, which previously she had tended to over-idealize.

Vanessa: For me I think this has been really helpful ... hearing you talk about how you can bridge ... integrate it into something that I would see as being almost impenetrable, the deadlines and the essay writing. And I really liked that. I think that's really profound ... I did run a course here, a workshop about a month ago for the adult education ... people were able to do the deep thing, but also the more surface thing, and it's relevant for everybody ... I suppose it is about just joining the dots, and making the training that I do and the creativity fit somewhere, in someone's narrative, in the way that you've done [the academics].

Recorded initial conversation, CCCU, 24/11/2015

She said that she was now going to run some creative workshops in embodied feminist practice at the university. The space available to her for 'playing' with knowing as a professional was growing broader and broader!

Participants next produced an aesthetic representation of their professional self-change as an outcome of the research. Dilbert's drawing was called 'The unwritten narrative'.

Fig. 49 Dilbert's object representing the changed self, CCCU, 24/11/2015.



He disclosed a biographical narrative about his relationship with knowing, sport, books, and cultural objects; he said that he was 'trying to locate a sense of being' (or of feeling alive, in Winnicott's terms, 1965) in his childhood. The first setting that he recalls was a 'semi idyllic' housing complex in the woods; then, when he was eleven years old, he and his family moved into an 'incredibly fine house', but family life became stormy. *The chiasm in the story*



*produced auto/biographical resonance for me.* The Penguin classic was a key character in the story, and a key transitional object (Bollas, 2009), perhaps.

Dilbert: I discovered film, theatre, boxing, tennis, football and rugby, reading, shady people. I was very isolated ... From this, which wasn't particularly humorous, I love the humour in the room ... And autonomy: the idea that hopefully we are developing a notion of freedom and independence ...

Annabel: That book cover in the middle there looks like it is a particular book..

Dilbert: Yeah. It is not, it is kind of indicative of a Penguin ... sort of classic of the 70s really. It is not any particular..

Gaia: But it is Penguin.

Dilbert: It's Penguin Classics, yeah [laughs] ... my mother was a librarian ... I went through all sorts of stuff before the age of 14. Just because we didn't have a telly and ... I was a long way from my friends ... so it was quite central.

Recorded final conversation, CCCU, 24/11/2015.

Vanessa's object representing how she changed during the research was an *assemblage* that she glued together, creating a work of art. She called it 'The limits are one's own'.

Fig. 50 Vanessa's object representing the changed self, CCCU, 24/11/2015.



Vanessa first described in detail the actions that she had undertaken to construct the object, and read notes that she had taken. She had an insight about the cut in the top-left board which

she decorated with a piece of orange felt, her 'golden glue'. She was coming come to celebrate her roots and deep struggles in this academic space.

Vanessa: And then cuts somehow became important, because I cut this at the beginning, and at the end I added this [orange thing] to what I had started with, so I made all my way back to the beginning... When you ask the question I never... I hold it lightly, and then the question is revealed in the making. I do not want to control that process.

Gaia: I found the cut interesting also because of the way you told the story of how you came back to the cut, at the end of the creation. And to me from here it looks like a decoration of the cut, like making it more precious.

Francesco: A little celebration of the cut. An altar.

Vanessa: Actually this thing here is like a love heart. I will reveal for you a secret [smiles].

Recorded final conversation, CCCU, 24/11/2015.

Vanessa's presentation led to an insight for Dilbert about the possibility of pleasure in the process of knowing/unknowing: a 'plenitude' that might be accessible to him too. He seemed to desire a more deeply felt sense of knowing and voice (Belenky *et al.*, 1986).

Dilbert: ... What strikes me about the way that you work ... every action within that construction is an end in itself, in the sense that there is pleasure in every movement ... as opposed to pleasure in the whole in the end ... I so often miss this little bit. I just go past, whereas you seem to see all of it. And I think that is a perspective that I would find incredibly valuable.

Vanessa: ... You can borrow it [smiles].

Dilbert: You know what? I was just thinking I'd like that! [smiles] [group laughs] because it is very pleasing to look at, isn't it? And as you described it I was realizing that ... hearing the artists talk about their construction, it actually helps you see the worth in what you can feel or what you are aware of but you cannot [explain].

Recorded final conversation, CCCU, 24/11/2015.

## Summary

These stories brought to light a dilemma within education about what kinds of knowledge are valid, and which ones we recognize as valuable for us. Dilbert spoke about liberal education and the emancipation of lives through critical thinking; but he seemed to be confined within the bounds of a rational and dualistic understanding (Bateson, 1979) of what thinking critically actually entails, which estranged him from his own words. This type of relationship with knowing has historically been embedded in academic culture (Belenky *et al.*, 1986): to the extent that academic discourse is dominated by abstract critical theorization, at the

expense of marginalizing the ‘self’ from scientific thinking. *This resonates with my own difficulty in embracing uncertainty while professing a complex constructivist epistemology!* Not knowing is feared both from a professional point of view (Bainbridge, 2012; Britzman, 2003; Schleifer, 1987) and existentially. Intuition and imagination are not valued in this construction of knowledge, because they embrace the uncertain and do not offer a well-defined line of argument. The dialogue with Vanessa, within the aesthetic, biographical ‘space of play’ of the workshop, seems to have offered Dilbert the possibility to doubt his own doubts, and live with a degree of irony and pleasure, perhaps, the paradox of knowing and not knowing. In tracing the roots of his true passion for literature to uncertain times, he disclosed a space in which to experience negative capability, that is ‘when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason’, as John Keats put it (1958, p. 79).

Vanessa, the other character in this story, came on the scene with her own struggles with knowing. My analysis of her biography helped me to think about the dilemma of intellectual vs. embodied thinking from the outsider’s position, as opposed to the academic insider represented by Dilbert – although Dilbert was not ‘fully’ an academic, he desired to become more of one, by doing an EdD. Vanessa was self-taught and had found her way to knowledge as an adult learner, taking the route of art instead of refined talk. Her knowing could thus be perceived as ‘rougher’ by a traditional ear. She herself was at risk of mythologizing the artistic and intuitive domain by viewing it as radically opposed to traditional knowledge, which she characterized as unfamiliar and intimidating to her. The myth of the impenetrable restrictions of the conventional education system was only disclosed as such at the end of the research: academia was then reframed as ‘an environment just like any other’, as Beatrice in the Bicocca group had said (supra p. 143), that featured both constraints and possibilities for learners and educators. Vanessa did not avoid the system (resistance), but creatively composed her art and the academic learning environment. The clash of deeply held metaphors of knowledge, between Dilbert and Vanessa, was interesting as it showed how one’s relationship with knowing and self may be weaved together with either a sense of possibility or of ‘despair’. The challenging and safe enough dialogue between these two, who took it in turns to provide a holding space for each other, allowed both of them to ask difficult questions and challenge their preferred narrative – metaphorically speaking, of ‘Walhalla land’ or of ‘Technocracy’, as Vanessa and Dilbert respectively labelled their stereotypical visions.

I have been wondering how a more sociological lens could make sense of these stories in terms of knowledge relations. For example, Dilbert spoke about the inevitability of the ‘inadequate representations’ available to him as a child, given that ‘my toy collection extended to one tank’ while ‘there were guys at school who had amazing scenes’. This

suggests issues of social class and economic status, which might be meaningfully related to a struggle for better representations and, through these, autonomy. Vanessa on her part talked about her schooling, her family's limited social capital, and learning about feminism. Why exactly these participants were drawn to embrace postmodernist views, critical theory, or emancipatory narratives I do not know, but surely both sociological and psychological factors came into play (Charlot, 1997). The peculiarity of my method of analysis in this study is that it embraces the two epistemological positions – insider/outsider, art/reason, etc. contributed by Dilbert and Vanessa, and examines how these are negotiated in the relationship between them, ultimately showing that the conflict was more than purely cognitive and more than purely subjective but included both dimensions.

Drawing on a psychoanalytic framework, the next chapter examines theoretical ideas of self and authenticity, and how object relation theories offer us a lexicon for speaking about processes of identity construction from a relational view that is compatible with a constructivist perspective.



## *Chapter Nine*

### **A relational perspective on the true and false self**

#### **Introduction**

In this chapter, I present related concepts which taken together define the ‘self’ as relational, psycho-social, and in a dynamic state of becoming that is shaped, among other factors, by the active work of a human agent in relationships with others. I have found guidance in psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott’s theories of ‘transitional space’ (Winnicott, 1971) and ‘true and false self’ (Winnicott, 1965). Winnicott envisaged a contingent, developmental, potentially agentic and moral self, which in certain ‘good enough’ conditions can learn to compose its more compliant and more spontaneous parts. Such a notion of selfhood provides a framework for thinking about processes of knowing and self-construction that remains valid even in light of postmodernist critiques of the modernist unified, transcendent self, which proposed that the ‘self’ is storied and linguistically determined (Hunt and West, 2009). Narrative researchers (Hunt and West, 2009; Sclater, 2004; West, 1996; Fabbri and Formenti, 1991) have proposed that individuals struggle for cohesion and integrity as they construct themselves psycho-socially, within cultural frameworks offering many different ‘transitional spaces’ – in both external ‘reality’ and inner worlds – in which parts of the self are created and negotiated. My analysis of the Bicocca and CCCU case studies led me to engage with these ideas, and to consider whether different ways of knowing (Heron, 1992) may be thought of as mediating the self’s negotiation between inside and outside. Nicole Mosconi’s idea (1996) that ‘culture’ presents the subject with transitional objects offering the possibility of creative ‘play’ of self and knowing, furthered my understanding of the interplay of subjective-objective knowledge within the quest for ‘authenticity’ and selfhood. This in fact is what I argue: in using different forms of knowing to connect with and separate from the external world (Winnicott, 1971), we cause the self to exist in different ways.

#### **The controversial notion of self**

The notion of self is a highly controversial one.<sup>121</sup> Modernist and postmodernist views of the self are often debated in relation to what the ‘self’ may be, its coherence and durability over time, its organization, its fragmentation, and the effects that different theorizations have when we design research on the basis of them (Hunt and West, 2009; Frosh, 1991; Gergen, 1991).

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<sup>121</sup> For the father of systemic theory, Gregory Bateson, for example, the concept of self is a ‘mythological component’, produced by separating the brain from a holistic mind-environment system (Bateson, in Telfener and Casadio, 2003, p. 450, my translation). Others, such as Francisco Varela have spoken in constructivist terms of ‘selfless selves’, i.e., viewing the self as an emergent property of network processes and ‘a coherent whole which is nowhere to be found, and yet can provide an occasion for coupling’ (Varela, 1991, p. 192). Antonio Damasio’s recent work possibly goes in this direction (Damasio, 2000).

In sum, a modern view claims that the self is unified, potentially coherent and masterful, and that it transcends the material body. Feminism, postmodernism and poststructuralism have challenged this self-actualising individual, framing it as a linguistic and historical fiction (Hunt and West, 2009). Identity has come to substitute the concept of self in much of the contemporary literature, which sometimes celebrates fragmentation and the potential that it provides for playfulness and fluidity, in contrast with the modernist focus on the authentic self (Gergen, 1991).

For some, it is of concern that the fragmentedness of contemporary lives may produce difficult and even ‘desperate’ struggles for selfhood, cohesion, integrity and agency.

Sociologists such as Giddens, and psychologists such as Frosh, locate such personal struggles in a wider but paradoxical context by suggesting that the culture of late modernity constantly precipitates crises of, as well as opportunity for, self. ... The paradox of the present lies in the combination of opportunities for men and women to experiment with who and what they are but in a context of fracture and desperate uncertainty. (West, 1996, p. 8)

West’s comment leads me to wonder how our relationship with knowing might be affected by the uncertainties of knowledge and risk societies (Beck, 1992), and how the intimate and the professional are played out in the desire to know and not to know, to become and not to become in a such a scenario of vulnerability.<sup>122</sup>

Drawing on recent studies in the field of narrative research, I myself adopt a broad definition of the self as developmental and relational, narrative and embodied.<sup>123</sup> Shelley Day Sclater’s article on the narrative subject has helped me to develop my own position within the debate that has arisen since the ‘narrative turn’, around essential or postmodern understandings of the subject. As Sclater puts it, the issue for social research is that in postmodern sense-making ‘it’s as if the self only exists through its fleeting yet continuous identifications with discursive positions’ (Sclater, 2004, p. 324); as a consequence, the researcher is left with no means of accessing ‘the subject’s moral agency, her embodiment, and the force of unconscious fantasy’ (ibid). In seeking to address this dilemma, Sclater invokes Winnicott’s ideas about the self as an ongoing process:

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<sup>122</sup> In recent years, a large body of literature has described changed conditions for professionals, due to the contemporary democratization of knowledge and phenomena of de- and re-professionalization (Barnett, in Cunningham, 2008; Beck, 2008).

<sup>123</sup> Hunt and West (2009) have offered an even more detailed conceptualization of the subject investigated by social research. Adding neurologist Antonio Damasio’s (2000) proposal of a perceptive ‘core self’ to this framework means further enriching it by taking into account the bodily as well as the social dimensions of self, acknowledging that the biographical self relies on a substrata of emotion. However, I do not draw on the detail of Damasio’s work as it does not serve the purposes of my study.

I have found it helpful to conceive of subjectivity as neither internal nor external, nor even as a product between “interactions” between the internal and the external, but as a process. The process is one of always-becoming, it is psycho-social, it involves the ongoing “identity work” of a human agent, and is dependent upon what Winnicott (1971) called a “potential” or “transitional” space in which aspects of the self are created and transformed in relationships with others and within the matrices of culture. (Sclater, 2004, p. 326)

Following a similar line of thinking, I am comfortable with psychoanalyst Linden West’s description of the subject at the centre of his academic work in adult education and research:

The concept of self that I am using is constructivist rather than essentialist, developmentally created in processes connecting culture and intimate relationships with the emergence of an internal life. (West, 1996, p. 10)

This perspective makes it possible to viewing subjectivity as socially constituted, while not ‘abandoning the idea of a self altogether’ (West, 1996, p. 211). West argues for a ‘deeper, developing and cohesive self beyond as well as within discursive relationships’ (ibid) – a definition of self that accounts for how subjects may come to take risks in their process of becoming, despite conditions that undermine agency, and allows for both the pain and the pleasure they inevitably experience as part of living. This is a self with some sense of continuity, and yet ‘forged in the network of affective relationships in which we are embedded’ (Hunt and West, 2009, p. 71). Psycho-social perspectives can usefully draw on the work of postmodern thinkers, such as Michel Foucault, and psychodynamic thinkers, such as Melanie Klein or Donald Winnicott, to build up an account of selves that continuously emerge from ‘the interplay of inner and outer worlds’ (ibid. p. 69).

Like Sclater, Linden West has been informed by the thinking of Winnicott (1971) in investigating how people go through transitional processes in negotiating their self-structures. Creative forms of storytelling, such as a work of art or integrating a new theoretical narrative, can help to symbolize new biographical possibilities. In other words, from a psychoanalytic perspective, ‘people and symbols, like a new idea, can be seen as “objects”, which are internalized and become part of a psychological dynamic’ (Merrill and West, 2009, p. 70). In object relation theories, such as those developed by Winnicott and Klein, the self and subjectivity are viewed as dynamic, ‘a never complete product of relationship with actual people and diverse objects, including the symbolic’ (ibid).

For West, the ‘self’ at the heart of this theory is contingent (reliant on others), constructed (forged in interaction with others, and with the broader cultural context and discourses), and developmental (open to change and with the potential to creatively challenge its interactions). Such a self may be seen as ‘emotional, embodied, relational, socio-cultural, discursive and



potentially agentic at the same time’ (ibid. p. 70). It is not a product of anything, but in processual terms represents a dynamic state of becoming that takes place within the many and differentiated ‘transitional spaces’ offered by culture, spaces which – as Sclater reminds us – are ‘both cultural and psychic’ (Sclater, 2004, p. 327). Hence, this theoretical framework crucially allows me to think of our relationship with knowing and culture as simultaneously both social and psychic, inner and outer.

It follows that, in keeping with object relations perspectives, the characteristics of intersubjective life, both in early life and in adulthood, are foundational to the possibilities of becoming experienced by the self (what Bollas has termed ‘a sense of destiny’, 2009, p. 87).

### **True and false self in Winnicott**

Donald Winnicott is one of the most preeminent figures in contemporary psychoanalysis. He drew on the thinking of Sigmund Freud and worked for many years as a practicing psychotherapist, studying the emotional development of infants in relation to the facilitating or non-facilitating environment.

Based on his psychoanalytic practice, he concluded that the psychic structures making up the self may be more or less integrated, and more or less self-protective in relation to others. In his 1965 essay *Ego Distortions in Terms of True and False Self*, Winnicott focused on how the central needs of what Freud called ‘Ego’ and outer needs vis-à-vis the world are negotiated (Winnicott, 1965, p. 140) during a process of emergence of a self that relates to the world as other. From a clinical case study of a middle-aged woman who ‘had a very successful False Self but who had the feeling all her life that she had not started to exist’ (ibid. p. 142),<sup>124</sup> Winnicott deduced the defensive nature of what he termed the False Self, whose ‘defensive function is to hide and protect the True Self, whatever that may be’ (ibid). He proposed five possible organizations of the False Self, which I quote in full, because they provide a clear account of how the interplay of compliant and spontaneous aspects in the individual may progress from ‘hiding and performing’ to more integrated forms of becoming.

(1) At one extreme: the False Self sets up as real and it is this that observers tend to think is the real person. In living relationships, work relationships, and friendships, however, the False Self begins to fail. In situations in which what is expected is a whole person the False Self has some essential lacking. At this extreme the True Self is hidden.

(2) Less extreme: the False Self defends the True Self; the True Self is, however, acknowledged as a potential and is allowed a secret life. Here is the clearest example of clinical illness as an organization with a positive aim, the preservation of the individual in

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<sup>124</sup> Later in this passage, Winnicott went on to observe that ‘she had always been looking for a means of getting to her True Self’ (Winnicott, 1965, p. 142), which rang a bell vis-à-vis my own story of relating to knowing.

spite of abnormal environmental conditions. This is an extension of the psycho-analytic concept of the value of symptoms to the sick person.

(3) More towards health: The False Self has as its main concern a search for conditions which will make it possible for the True Self to come into its own. If conditions cannot be found then there must be reorganized a new defence against exploitation of the True Self, and if there be doubt then the clinical result is suicide. Suicide in this context is the destruction of the total self in avoidance of annihilation of the True Self. When suicide is the only defence left against betrayal of the True Self, then it becomes the lot of the False Self to organize the suicide. This, of course, involves its own destruction, but at the same time eliminates the need for its continued existence, since its function is the protection of the True Self from insult.

(4) Still further towards health: the False Self is built on identifications (as for example that of the patient mentioned, whose childhood environment and whose actual nannie gave much colour to the False Self organization).

(5) In health: the False Self is represented by the whole organization of the polite and mannered social attitude, a 'not wearing the heart on the sleeve', as might be said. Much has gone to the individual's ability to forgo omnipotence and the primary process in general, the gain being the place in society which can never be attained or maintained by the True Self alone. (Winnicott, 1965, p. 142)

In sum, what I take from this theoretical model is that when a 'false self' organization – the persona (mask) – is totalizing, it prevents the individual from living relationships fully, emotionally and imaginatively. The most emancipated situation – which Winnicott labels 'in health' – is that in which True and False are creatively composed within relationships and form a 'whole person', who is both responsive to conventions and external expectations *and* close to the heart 'under its sleeve'.

False self-structure originates, according to Winnicott, in the failure of the mother or early care givers to be 'good-enough' in terms of recognizing the infant's omnipotence and making sense of it for the child by responding to its gestures. A psychic defence is thus constructed against 'that which is unthinkable, the exploitation of the True Self, which would result in its annihilation' (ibid. p. 147). However fuzzily, we may think of the True Self as 'a theoretical position from which come the spontaneous gesture and the personal idea' (ibid. p. 148), and therefore as something that we associate with being creative.

In the healthy individual who has a compliant aspect of the self but who exists and who is a creative and spontaneous being, there is at the same time a capacity for the use of symbols. In other words health here is closely bound up with the capacity of the individual to live in an area that is intermediate between the dream and the reality, that which is called the cultural life. (Winnicott, 1965, p. 150)

Being all in our head, or over-intellectualizing experience, can dissociate us from the truer and psychosomatic ‘experience of liveliness’ (ibid). False self-organizations result in feeling ‘unreal’ or in a sense of ‘futility’ (ibid), *which resembles what I have autobiographically termed a sense of vagueness*.<sup>125</sup> Winnicott spoke in fact of a compliant dimension of self and an ability ‘to comply and not to be exposed’ (ibid. p. 149), which spoke to me of issues of being silenced (Belenky *et al.*, 1986), and hiding from knowing. A lack of satisfaction in subjects’ relationship with knowing may arise in the absence of ‘good enough’ conditions to enable ‘the structuring of coherent selfhood and the capacity for thinking fuelled by a passionate engagement with the world’ (Hunt and West, 2009, p. 74).

From an auto/biographical perspective, I wish to explicitly acknowledge that Winnicott’s way of framing his thinking encourages me to persevere in seeking to develop a constructed understanding of difficult and even mysterious ideas about human life. His writing offers ‘good enough’ conditions for me – or other readers – to engage with his thinking, in that he seems to speak from a place of practice and embodied encounter with something that he himself, paradoxically, cannot fully understand (he refers to the True Self as ‘whatever that may be’). I would say that he offers a ‘playful’ text, in his own terms. Using a ‘connected’ language, he attempts to indicate a direction in which to look, while seeming to accept that human experience may ultimately elude full scientific definition. I therefore attempt to draw on Winnicott’s ideas, aided by the work of other scholars who have used his ideas in educational research, so as to embroider more understandable stories about my own academic research.

### **Transitional and potential spaces of becoming**

Transitional space is a concept originally theorized by Donald Winnicott, and it denotes changes in relationships among people. Winnicott was interested in exploring how an infant can separate from a prime caregiver in psychologically healthy ways. In his last book, *Playing and Reality* published in 1971, which is sometimes regarded as his testament (Green, 2005), Winnicott situated play, like other transitional phenomena, between inner and outer reality. This third area, says Winnicott, is experienced by the baby as a resting-place from the task of reality acceptance, in which the illusion of unity of me and not-me (shared reality) is unchallenged.

This intermediate area of experience [...] constitutes the greater part of the infant’s experience, and throughout life is retained in the intense experiencing that belongs to the arts and to religion and to imaginative living, and to creative scientific work. [...] Paradox accepted can have positive value. The resolution of paradox leads to a defence organization

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<sup>125</sup> See the paragraph ‘Acknowledging what does not work’, in Chapter Three, *supra* pp. 66-97.

which in the adult one can encounter as true and false self organization. (Winnicott, 1971, p. 19)

Winnicott applied the same principles to processes of separation and self-negotiation in adult life also, trying to make sense of how people can ‘move from dependency and defensiveness towards greater openness to experience and creative forms of endeavour’ (Merrill and West, 2009, p. 82). Play is essentially satisfying (Winnicott, 1971, p. 70) and allows the individual child or adult to be creative and to ‘use the whole personality’ (ibid. p. 73), but it depends on very specific conditions of being ‘reflected back’ (ibid. p. 86) or, in other words, of being loved. ‘Cultural experience’ is for Winnicott ‘the common pool of humanity’ (ibid. p. 133) to which we may contribute, and from which we may draw ‘if we have somewhere to put what we find’ (ibid), namely a transitional space of creativity and ‘play’ that inspires our trust.

The place where cultural experience is located is in the *potential space* between the individual and the environment (originally the object). The same can be said of playing. Cultural experience begins with creative living first manifested in play. (ibid. p. 135, italics in original)

Transitional spaces of self-negotiation in adulthood may be as many and varied as an adult learning or research group, an interview, a therapeutic setting, or, as I argue, a co-operative inquiry workshop with specific features, but also the space of written narrative (Sclater, 2004). Significant others, present or evoked, are seen to play an important part in our re-evaluations of self and future.

A person could come to think and feel differently towards self, “reality” and future possibilities because of the capacity of significant others (like a teacher or other respected professional) to contain anxiety, to encourage and to challenge but also to respond to what was being attempted in ways that legitimized risk taking. (Merrill and West, 2009, p. 82)

This ‘playing’ of the self in the blurred area of the potential space is mediated, Winnicott claimed, by ‘transitional objects’. In psychoanalytic object relation theories, such as that of Melanie Klein, the ‘object’ becomes an object of thought within the dynamics of the psyche, and is therefore under magical control. Winnicott, on the other hand, proposed that transitional objects are in fact both in the external world of ‘reality’ and in the inner world of the psyche, and work precisely – and paradoxically – as mediators of the dynamic interaction between self and world. For the purposes of my thesis, it is sufficient to note that:

Essential to all this [concept of transitional space] is continuity (in time) of the external emotional environment and of particular elements in the physical environment such as the transitional object or objects. (Winnicott, 1971, p. 18)

According to Winnicott, truer selves have the potential to make creative use of objects (ibid. p. 137). Drawing on Winnicott's use of the object, Bollas has theorized that by selecting and using actual objects from the 'real' of our everyday lives, 'we fashion an existence for ourselves' (Bollas, 2009, p. 86) and 'give lived expression to one's true self' (ibid. p. 87). More recently social researchers have proposed that narrative - that is to say the relational experience of telling stories of self to others - plays a key role in transition from more defensive to more creative forms of self-presentation. Specifically, narrative constitutes a transitional area of experience, within which the self is 'constantly negotiating its position in relation to others' (Merrill and West, 2009, p. 122), the narrated story, the biography, and the audience. In the context of the auto/biographical interview in particular, West says that

The self may initially use predictable scripts, reflecting dominant ideologies, but may come to question these in the light of new experience, including in the interview process. Shifts in the quality of authorship, and agency, can take place when people feel encouraged to tell stories and feel really listened to and understood. New sense of legitimacy and self-understanding, via greater narrative coherence and acceptance in the eyes of significant others, may begin to develop. (Merrill and West, 2009, p. 122)

Sclater has suggested an interesting link here between personal narratives and storytelling, and the issue of 'occupying a place' (Charlot, 1997), or perhaps a space, in relation to the world. In terms of our relationship with knowing, I read this as an invitation not to view social and psychic 'transitional' spaces as separate, but to occupy them in such a way that our becoming is integrated with that of the worlds we inhabit.

Personal narratives, like Winnicott's transitional phenomena, have their origin neither wholly inside the teller, nor wholly outside of them in culture. Rather, they are a dynamic mixture of the subjectively experienced, the objectively perceived and the relational, and are reducible to none of these things. [...] To tell one's story is to occupy such a transitional space. It is a way of integrating inner and outer. (Sclater, 2004, p. 327)

Another key insight that has emerged from the narrative research of Sclater, West and others, is that words are a key language but not the only one drawn on by the self in expressing its process of becoming.

Subjectivity is not just a linguistic phenomenon – to phrase the issue in this way is to suggest that selves are superficial, insubstantial, and implies also a limited view of language. Language and discourse and narrative are complex socio-cultural systems; most crucially, they are signifying practices that operate at many levels. Further, subjectivity can be expressed in ways other than through talk (art, poetry, dance, ordinary “body language”, and so on). (Sclater, 2004, p. 326)

Telling stories *and* interacting with actual objects and bodies in the ‘real world’ both enable mutual coordination and self-making, in conscious and unconscious complex forms, and this is how I would now define ‘*linguaging*’ in simpler terms.

### **Playing with knowing**

In relational views of the self it is believed that supportive relationships and environments help processes of self-negotiation and creative self-construction to happen, and that more confident inner states can be achieved in the process:

Higher education is potentially a space in which to manage and transcend feelings of marginalization, meaninglessness and inauthenticity in interaction with others; in which it is possible, given their support and encouragement, to compose a new life, a different story and a more cohesive self. (West, 1996, p. 10)

In my study, self-integration, creativity and playfulness were fostered by a process in which diverse ways of knowing through feeling with the senses, intuiting patterns, and exercising critical thinking (as in Heron’s views on knowledge, 1992, 1999) came together into a more integrated form of knowing. Via my participants’ stories, I have suggested that playing around knowing triggers changes in subjectivity. In engaging with different ways of knowing, a self negotiates something of who he or she is, in relation to others.

‘Playing’ with knowing encompasses constructing one’s self-image and identity as a learner, developing relationships with significant others and culture, and trying out different ways of expressing and articulating the self.

As outlined earlier in this thesis, John Heron (1992) has discussed the possibility of becoming a more integrated and effective person in the world by undergoing a developmental process of integrating different modes of knowing and drawing together individuating and participatory polarities.<sup>126</sup> Drawing on general systems theory (Laszlo, 1972; von Bertalanffy, 1972), he sees the person as ‘a system whose nature arises from the interactions of its parts’ (Heron, 1999, p. 23). The ego can develop forms of ‘defensive closure’ (Heron, 1992, p. 36) to manage the anxieties inherent in human conditions, such as not knowing and separation, so

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<sup>126</sup> I have explained this above in Chapter Two (see *supra* p. 49).

that openness to the world is often impeded. The alienation and exclusion of some parts of the self may be overcome by striving to integrate one's own multiple parts, and multiple ways of knowing. This 'holistic' knowing is non-alienated and in this sense undistorted:

As well as being autonomous, learning is also necessarily holistic, that is, it involves the whole person, a being that is physical, perceptual, affective, cognitive (intellectual, imaginative, intuitive), conative (exercising the will), social and political, psychic and spiritual. It may involve the whole person negatively by the denial of some of these aspects and their exclusion from learning. In this case we get alienation, such as intellectual learning alienated from affective and imaginal learning, with the result that the repression of what is excluded distorts the learning of what is included. (Heron, 1999, p. 23)

Within this theory of self-development, the integrated whole person fluidly interacts with self and other at the intrapsychic, intersubjective, cultural, ecological, and transpersonal levels, and is better able 'to participate in wider unities of being' by 'feeling' what is present through attunement and resonance at all levels of life (ibid. p. 45). Heron emphasized the human condition of over-individuation which characterizes much of adult life, as opposed to the over-participative, undifferentiated experience of childhood.<sup>127</sup> Different 'states of personhood' conceptually articulate how an adult person develops from a more inhibited, through more consciously creative self-expression, towards a more spontaneous 'living presence' (Heron, 1992, p. 63). While the process is chaotic and situated, a more integrated self gradually emerges which is more able of: healing from (past) afflictions (ibid. p. 60), cultivating internal dialogue with the multiplicity of the psyche (ibid), extending authentic performance (ibid. p. 61), and attending to the realization of its spiritual potential (ibid. p. 62). This theorization of a sort of 'systemic' authenticity addresses the subject-object split, and phenomena of inner splitting such as, for example, being in one's head, by promoting a 'unitive transaction of the ensouled body' (ibid. p. 80) with its world. The words of psychiatrist R.D. Laing on alienation and mystery which I quoted in the Introduction resonate with Heron's view:

True sanity entails in one way or another the dissolution of the normal ego, that false self completely adjusted to our alienated social reality [...] and through this death a rebirth [...] the ego now being the servant of the divine, no longer its betrayer. (Laing, 1967, p. 119)

To look at how the self can become more creative and playful, I propose, as an alternative, that we draw on Winnicott's approach to object relations theory to think of different ways of knowing as different transitional objects that allow the self to engage in different identity

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<sup>127</sup> Heron's methodological book *Co-operative Inquiry* (1996) is subtitled *Research into the Human Condition*.

games, some of which are more highly regarded than others in our society as warned by Laing. Possibly, by engaging with embodied, aesthetic, affective, intuitive, and intellectual ways of knowing, more ‘masculine’ and more ‘feminine’ modes of the psyche may be brought together (Belenky *et al.*, 1986). The idea of exploring knowing in light of Winnicott’s transitional object theory was suggested to me by Nicole Mosconi (1996). Mosconi examined the process through which object relations develop into a relationship with knowing; she understands the latter as our relationship with a shared and socialized world of contents and modes of knowing that corresponds to Winnicott’s potential area of cultural experience. In arguing for a similarity between transitional object relations and our relationship with objects of knowledge – of different kinds, both intellectual and non, thus thinking with Winnicott of ‘culture’ in a wide sense –, she emphasizes his description of the area of transitional phenomena and transitional objects as an ‘infinite area of separation’ (Winnicott, 1971, p. 146), that is to say, of separation and connection between me and not-me, self and otherness, ‘loss and presence’ (Mosconi, 1996, p. 80). The shared characteristics of transitional objects and forms of knowing are reflected in the observations that ‘knowing reassures and appeases against the foreignness of the external world’ (*ibid.* p. 85), ‘it can be the object of strong feelings of love and hate’ (*ibid.*), and is neither recognized as external nor is confused with the subject, but is in part recreated in the process of learning. Therefore, knowing is ‘a mediator between personal psychic reality and shared external reality’ (*ibid.* p. 86) and participates in the ‘process of illusion-disillusionment started off by the maternal object’ (*ibid.* p. 87).

I would thus argue that the subject’s use of different forms of knowing to connect with and separate from the external world give rise to correspondingly different modes of self-existence. We might think of cultural heritage, in its localised and contextualized forms, as offering specific kinds of maternal environment which present objects that have been created by drawing on a social imaginary, which ‘exist and have value inside of and thanks to their social institution’ (*ibid.* p. 96).

It is through relating to such forms of knowing, which are simultaneously available to be found and to be imaginatively created, that a psychosocial subject negotiates creative forms of structural coupling (Maturana, 1990) between self and other. The interplay between cultural tradition and invention, from which the subject creates ‘new contents or forms of knowing’ (*ibid.*), is somehow close to the dynamic interplay between the outer and inner spaces experienced by the self, or the intermediate potential area of becoming.

### **Social Learning Theory**

In this chapter, I have offered a psychosocial account of human learning based on psychoanalytical object relations theories, within a systemic and relational framework. What do I mean, however, by social learning?



In the course of my enquiry, I have expanded the term 'social learning' to better suit my emergent auto/biographical methodological approach. I first engaged the participants (and myself) in questioning the role of 'relating' in the process of knowledge construction, working on the premise that information-processing is not only cognitive and therefore cannot be measured. This led me to think of learners as reciprocally coordinating their symbolic interaction, in such a way as to embrace the contributions of perception, affect and (social) imagination to individual becoming. Conflicts and crises were pivotal to my research, and my analysis has shown that active engagement in representing and re-experiencing knowledge produced changed narratives of self (Richardson, 1997). The ideas I have come to articulate in this chapter, and throughout my thesis, point to a more comprehensive theoretical framework of psychosocial learning that draws on psychoanalysis, psychology, and sociology. This prompts me to examine how dominant theories in social psychology connect with my own research approach.

Psychologist Albert Bandura's 'social cognitive approach', which he formalized in the 1960s and 1970s, implies that people learn through observing others' behaviour, attitudes, and outcomes of behaviours. This means that children and adults select, abstract, and integrate information encountered across a variety of social experiences, to mentally represent their environments and themselves in terms of classes of cognition, self-efficacy, and standards for evaluative self-reactions. Grusec (1992) noted that Bandura distanced himself from both psychoanalytic ideas (too difficult to model) and Piagetian claims that cognitive conflict between mental schemata and events can give rise to maturation, attributing the latter solely to modelling and persuasion in the course of social interaction. While Bandura's cognitive approach is different from my constructivist-systemic view, I find his ideas of observational learning and reciprocal determinism worth reflecting on.

Observational learning through modelling and imitation ties in with what I have been thinking about as the socialization of privileged forms of knowing (Charlot, 1997) in work settings. Self-efficacy for Bandura is a set of domain-specific beliefs about their own abilities that individuals have internalized from biographical experience, and which guide them towards and influence achievement via emotional arousal. My research pointed up the fact that professional self-perceptions, which are often negative, stem from both intimate and public interactions, but are negotiable in the here-and-now, and go beyond the mere effect of observing others. The other link between my work and Bandura's theories is reciprocal determinism, which defines learning as a triadic interrelationship between individual (cognition and biology), environment (modelling), and behaviour. Bandura's triadic relationship might be used to discuss what Maturana (1990) termed structural coupling, because it implies that co-operative groups emerge from the reciprocal behaviour of individuals within an environment that they contribute to shaping. However, in Bandura's

view, guided instruction and modelling drive individual and social change (Grusec, 1992), while the idea of structural coupling entails recursive interaction.

The adoption of a constructivist, systemic approach has the potential to positively contribute to contemporary debates in the social sciences, particularly in relation to transformative learning and socio-material approaches. Mezirow (2000; 1991) developed a learning theory explaining that personal and social change occurs by challenging taken-for-granted meaning perspectives through reflective dialogue. In social learning terms, this brings into focus how the images and concepts guiding individual action are formed, and transformed, during social interaction. Scholars have recently called for the development of a more integrated transformative learning paradigm (Hoggan *et al.*, 2017; Taylor and Cranton, 2012) and related inclusive educative practice (Belenky and Stanton, 2000). My own contribution illustrates the potential to explore the proximal systems (work, family, community) in which learning occurs, by using aesthetic practice to foster reflexivity (more so than rational argumentation)<sup>128</sup> in a group setting. In this case, the research space is viewed as a specific social learning context to be observed.

Tara Fenwick and Richard Edwards (2013) have drawn a particularly generative connection between socio-material approaches (TF) and complexity sciences (RE), which I claim may be enriched by my research. These two paradigms share an understanding of learning as a communicative process that takes place through both ‘linguistic’ (symbolic) and material interaction, so that learning is not internal to the mind, but continuously performed or enacted. Socio-materialists more specifically claim that the material and human are mutual constituent enactments of the social, and that learning is an ‘immanent assemblage’ given by the interaction of a network of disparate entities (Fenwick and Edwards, 2013, p. 54). For example, observing how networks such as ‘the university’, which are enacted by rules, rooms, etc., act on and order behaviours, allows us to discover how they may be dismantled, so that alternative forms of organization can come into being. Complex or systemic epistemologies on the other hand are also concerned with the possibilities and constraints of complex interactions between inanimate and animate – including human – beings, but conserve a view of the self as agentic without going so far as to attribute agency to matter. My own work retains a focus on human *ways of relating to* self, others and the world: I offer a different approach to the study of social learning, by drawing on psychoanalytic object relations theories to explore how humans interact with objects, both material and symbolic. I return to this point in the Conclusion.

## Summary

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<sup>128</sup> See Hunt (2013); my own position concerning reflexivity and reflection will be outlined in the last chapter.

By drawing on the concepts of relationship with knowing and self-construction developed by Bernard Charlot and Donald Winnicott, respectively, as well as on key connections between them suggested by other scholars who came to my help from the fields of adult learning and education, at the conclusion of my research process, I have constructed my own theoretical framework and ‘intelligent understanding’ (Formenti, 2008), which will inform my future research and transformative professional practice.

This is a complex framework and a ‘spiralling’ one: the more I work on it by making connections with the workshop experience and process of learning reflected in my ‘data’, connecting the various threads, and living my quest, the more spacious my thinking becomes. It is becoming my epistemologically founded choice to invite more theoretical friends into the conversation to construct more comprehensive understandings of the ways in which adults create and transform their selves and their knowing throughout their lives, both professionally and personally – the ‘*what*’ part of my research question –; and *how* this is supported by a transformative research space that I think of as aesthetic and reflexive. I have conceptualized this space in terms of integrating body, emotion, imagination, and intellect – Heron’s (1992) congruent knowing; by composing self and other, inner and outer authority (Belenky *et al.*, 1986); and by challenging what we think we know by becoming reflexive about our assumptions through creative re-presentation (Richardson, 1997) and dialogue. Our professional knowing is sometimes narrow, self-constraining, and fragmented; therefore I have argued that this needs to be challenged through engagement with other ways of knowing to foster more cohesive forms of self-actualization.

A transitional object perspective sheds light for me on how different forms of knowing may be both culturally/linguistically codified *and* subjectively ‘perceived’ (in a ‘raw’ form that is difficult to analyse academically), imagined and related to. Writing about my participants’ experience at the Embodied Narratives research workshops has helped me to interrogate the depths of personal and epistemological processes, and ask under what conditions these may be intertwined with a sense of hope – ‘life that feels worth living’ (Winnicott, 1971, p. 87) – or, on the contrary, of despair when the composition of ‘false’ and ‘truer’ aspects of the self seem difficult. Our engagement with culture in a broad sense, inside of a co-operative research environment, brought my participants and me to ask how a professional and a self can feel more ‘real’, creative and somehow ‘authentic enough’ in relation to knowing, with others and in the world. Before drawing my final conclusions, I now go through one last reflexive spiralling into my own experience of the workshop to highlight how the research and the writing worked for me as a transitional space in which I challenged and, in part, transformed my ways of knowing, as part of my broader quest for more integrated and creative strategies of becoming and producing academic work.

## *Chapter Ten*

### **Case Study 3**

#### **Becoming a ‘good-enough’ researcher**

In my new robe  
this morning –  
someone else.  
(Bashō, 1985)

#### **Introduction**

In this chapter, I explore how I myself, as the researcher, experienced the research process from within, seeking to answer the question: *how* does a process of becoming a professional researcher and *formateur* unfold, from a constructivist and co-operative perspective (Formenti, 2008, 1998; Heron, 1996)? In the course of this exploration, observed ‘reality’ is refracted once again (Richardson, 1997), and further representations of experience are selected and interpreted, crafting the story of my own learning as a co-operative researcher, as it is possible for me to tell it, today. In order to generate the research material, the researcher-*bricoleur* ‘uses the aesthetic and material tools of his or her craft [...]. If the researcher needs to invent, or piece together, new tools or techniques, he or she will do so’ (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005, p. 5). Thus, I generated qualitative material of different kinds – pictures, drawings, texts, selecting different techniques and materials as a function of the salient questions at each stage of the research. I took pictures of myself and Francesco (as a visual record of our interaction) before, during, and after the workshops; I undertook the same autobiographical reflexive cycle (on my learning biography) that I was proposing to my research participants; I kept an auto/biographical journal about the research. Finally, I asked my colleague Francesco, after the intensive weekends – which were difficult for us as facilitators, in the ways I have described in Chapters Five and Seven –, to become reflexive by writing about his own experience and learning from these particular sessions.

I brought a narrative, creative and non-systematic style of analysis to bear on this rich mixture of materials, selecting the parts that I felt to be most revealing of changes in my ways of knowing. I especially focused on incidents or ‘embarrassments’ (Sclavi, 2003) during the research that had given rise to intense moments of reflexivity and learning for me. As I began to analyse these episodes, I realized that my interaction with my co-facilitator Francesco was the source of repeated crises for me as the desired Other,<sup>129</sup> and also – especially at the

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<sup>129</sup> Male, older, an experienced academic, and a philosopher, Francesco had studied with Riccardo Massa, after whom the Department in Bicocca is named, and with Massa’s colleague and friend, Angelo Franza, both of whom had pioneered the clinical-educational approach in the 1980s (see fn. 85 on *clinica della formazione*). He was everything I was not.

beginning of the research process – my interaction with my supervisor Laura Formenti – offered an interesting focus. My interaction with the group remained a significant source of learning for me throughout the entire project.

I applied Marianella Sclavi's principle of clumsiness, viewing feelings of unease and emotional dissonances not as something to avoid, but 'as key epistemological resources, occasions for exploring and welcoming other frames of reference' (Sclavi, 2003, p. 100, my translation).

This method entailed using various artefacts to document challenges that I had experienced, and then reflexively observing what I had learnt. The chapter is divided into five sections, each of which describes a turning point associated with an incident that took place during the research. I do not discuss all the interesting things that happened, some of which may have escaped my conscious awareness in any case, but only those that illustrate aspects of the flow of professional becoming that I noted during the co-operative process. I now see this flow as bringing about a gradual transformation in my researcher self, from an 'in-the-head' researcher and facilitator who tended to over-idealize research, knowledge, and 'experts', to an 'embodied' researcher who was inside the process, and allowed the group to help her identify a route to learning. The five steps that I outline are all crucial operations – cognitive, affective, relational, imaginative, ethical, and so on (Fabbri and Munari, 1990) – that link the universal to the particular. Other researchers may have to go through similar steps in their epistemological and professional development, albeit not necessarily in this order or with the same catalysts. I next outline each of these crucial operations in turn, using my own experience as my primary evidence. They are:

- 1) Tasting difference
- 2) Entering the spiral
- 3) Exploring the potential space
- 4) Developing more intimate relationships
- 5) Repositioning inside the group mind

### **1) Tasting difference**

I define the epistemological operation of 'tasting difference' as the step of encountering the other who is different to oneself, with a different epistemology, learning history, embodiment, etc. Tasting the difference between self and other, as well as between different contexts and personae (social constructions of identity) is crucial when embarking on a journey of learning. It is like asking: Who is here? Where are we?

This step was exemplified for me by the following events. In preparation for the first cooperative inquiry session, I had visited my supervisor and methodological advisor, Laura Formenti, with the purpose of drawing up the first day's programme together using her

methodology: I wished to apply it correctly and ‘perform’ well – or perhaps I wished to ‘appropriate [her] art’, as Beatrice said (see the section ‘The self as dream and desire’, Chapter Six).



Fig. 51 Francesco and I in Bicocca, 16/01/2015.

Fig. 52 Myself in CCCU, 24/01/2015.

On the morning of 16 January 2015, I met the group in Bicocca for the first day of research, feeling very excited and quite tense, as my expression in the picture on the left above shows. To give myself confidence, I had dressed smartly and ‘professionally’, as I usually did when tutoring groups *en formation* in private companies. In the photograph, taken by Francesco, I am partly hiding behind his shoulder. The long corridor behind us now metaphorically evokes for me the long way still ahead of us, and the fact that we were still outside of the research space that was to be created – albeit already inside academic institutional space, of course. As earlier described, I was not happy with how Francesco facilitated this session (see the section ‘First Step: Chaos’ in Chapter Five), and I spoke to him about this later, and again more extensively during a recorded Skype call after the corresponding session in CCCU. In this call, I explained that I had perceived his presence on the research scene and in our intersubjective space as overly assertive and ‘loud’; he had seemed to speak from the perspective of a *formateur*, directing the group towards his theoretical interpretation, instead of facilitating a co-operative process.<sup>130</sup> At the same time, I had noticed that his discourse distanced the other, by making use of an academic lexicon that drew on academic knowledge of the research object. I proposed that instead we should listen to the flow of ideas taking shape in the group and facilitate their negotiation. I also told Francesco that – as a young woman? – I had the impression that he had tried to ‘protect’ me from questions with the potential to challenge my role as leader – Federico had been quite tough at the start, for example. Beginning with this first clash of imaginations, the dynamics of the collaboration

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<sup>130</sup> I do not analyse my relationship with Francesco from a gendered or feminist perspective, because I am more interested in exploring its interpersonal dynamics in relation to my own learning biography, as presented throughout the thesis.

between Francesco and me fully captured my attention: hence this was another negotiable space (of knowing and self) within the space of the co-operative inquiry! His interest in this project, he said, was to experiment with intertwining a systemic and a clinical approach to research. Mine, on the other hand, was to learn the systemic approach better, ultimately to produce a good piece of academic work. I did not wish to be confused by his clinical methodology!<sup>131</sup>

The first session at CCCU felt more comfortable to me because I felt different in Canterbury. As mentioned in the Introduction, here I was in ‘my own’ academic context, although still quite new to it, I could speak English and I was familiar with the culture. Most importantly, Francesco was not a recognizable persona here, so we were more likely to be perceived as at the same level. In the picture on the right above, I look more relaxed, yet tired. I took this photo of myself in the women’s restroom in CCCU before the session started. Taking it, I believe, was part of preparing myself differently this time. I was wearing a black sweater over black trousers, a casual look in which I feel comfortable. I took a moment for myself before the start of the session. The women’s toilet is a room in which I have prepared myself on many occasions for professional situations such as job interviews: it is a semi-private space in which one is conventionally allowed to take care of one’s sensing and feeling body. Behind me in the picture stands a distributor of tampons. The sign ‘*femme*’ (woman, in French) is quite visible, and to me it suggests something about more intimately contacting my gendered and embodied researcher self before initiating the research action.<sup>132</sup> A mirror on the wall at the height of my face suggests to me a potential space for the ‘play’ of self (Winnicott, 1971). I earlier discussed the fact that speaking in English produced an impression of greater clarity for both Francesco and myself, because it forced us to use what we had; I think it prevented him from beating around the bush and indulging in rhetorical exercises.

## 2) Entering the spiral

By ‘entering the spiral’, I mean the epistemological step of beginning to practice ‘spiralling’ (Heron, 1992), in terms of slowly shifting from a preoccupation with perfect design towards experiencing what Heron’s (ibid) congruent knowing – integrating body and head, subjective-objective and practical knowledge – might concretely be about. At this step, the researcher begins to be intrigued by the methodology as it translates into praxis, and initiates her own aesthetic work too, engaging with the spiral as both method and experience. ‘Doing well’ is still a preeminent worry.

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<sup>131</sup> See fn. 85.

<sup>132</sup> I am thinking here of how I contacted an intimate space of the self, embodied and unique, and through this ‘resting’, how I got started on the road to greater self-awareness and a more ‘felt sense’ of my own presence (what my physical body could tell me, according to Gendlin, 1978), within the research process and in relation to Francesco.

Below are the creative materials that I borrowed in CCCU; I took the dirty brushes with me to the second session in Bicocca, thinking that they might evoke embodied memories of childhood and invite play. In the photograph, the box is between my feet, as though I wished to ‘get hold’ of – to control? – the work and the workings of the methodology. I have an embodied memory of that moment and I can recollect my position with my legs spread out and my feet firmly planted on the floor, as though I desired to construct a position for myself that was more strongly grounded in practice.



Fig. 53 Creative materials borrowed from CCCU, 09/02/2015.



Fig. 54 Myself in the setting at CCCU, 21/02/2015.

I had sent Formenti a proposed storyboard for this research session, which she had read and commented on, so Francesco and I went through her comments and had a conversation about them, discussing each epistemological action, the language to be used, and the time to allowed for the different activities. This was the first time that Francesco and myself had together encountered the approach of another ‘expert’, Formenti, both of us from the position of students (despite our different backgrounds, personae and interests). We had begun to construct some common ground in our approach to the research, and were both enthusiastic about the opportunity to produce our own interpretation of the spiral of knowledge.

I was excited to have finally gained access to my mentor’s store of practical knowledge. By commenting on my proposed research practice design, she was sharing some of her knowhow and experience as a researcher and facilitator with me. We had created a method of mediated dialogue in which I was not frightened by not knowing, a sort of craftworker’s apprenticeship – I actually shared this perception with Laura, telling that I viewed coming to sessions with her as ‘*andare a bottega*’, which in Italian literally means going to her workshop! Around this time, I began to bring into focus my desire to become a good facilitator and *formateur*



through the research, which I had been less conscious of before. I was still very anxious, though, about being ‘up to scratch’ and ‘performing’ well in my project and in the eyes of the expert. Before this session in Milan, I went to see her to share changes and fine-tune my programme, and literally walked her to her train while going on asking questions!

After the session, I wrote in my journal about my co-facilitator’s observation that I had seemed to ‘rush’ in explaining the various research activities to the group, despite the fact that I had put great effort and care-full preparation into them. I was struck by this and wondered whether my hurry had to do with feeling uncomfortable ‘on stage’ (in the sense of being highly visible within the group), and the fear of not ‘being good’ (or knowledgeable), as my mother would say. My anxieties replayed again and again, as though to imply that for significant learning to take place, we need to go through repeated cycles of lived experience, each on a different coil in our spiralling and unfolding.

I particularly like the right-hand picture above, because it exemplifies how I was now increasingly entering the research space. I am standing inside of the circle of chairs and observing the work from within this circle, symbolically as well as physically; yet my body posture is quite rigid, with blocked knees (preventing movement), and I am still carrying my handbag as though ready to leave in a hurry. The chairs are empty and I am alone fishing for data like a greedy scientist.<sup>133</sup>

After this meeting, I conducted my first individual autobiographical session in my kitchen at home in Milan. I produced a drawing of my River of Learning and two written texts: the imaginative piece about the drawing, *Let me introduce myself*, and the epistemological description *If my learning biography were a river*. Drawing on Richardson’s (1997) method of creative analysis, I now present a short poem poetically extracted from these two texts (Cupane, 2009). Both drawing and poem strongly connect my emergent understanding of my story of knowing with the spiralling research process I was plunging myself into, and my autobiographical with my researcher self.

Only 18 months after composing it did I find a satisfactory title for this poem. Playing with a phrase used by Vanessa and Annabel to describe their satisfying theory – ‘and then we have a “wellspring of knowing”’, as reported in Chapter Eight, supra p. 200 –, I composed my deep unconscious or ‘well’, and flourishing or ‘spring’, into ‘Well-spring of knowing’.

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<sup>133</sup> There are curious similarities (and differences) between this image and one of the metaphor of knowledge cards (Fabbri and Munari, 2010) that I chose during my reflexive practice and present later in this chapter.

Fig. 55 Del Negro, My river of learning, Milan, 12/03/2015



#### WELL-SPRING OF KNOWING

Let me introduce myself  
I am a river, a star, a joke

I flow from the outside to the inside  
From separation to contact with something less owed  
More loved and suffered for  
Slippery, savoury

I turn round and round and back  
Depths open up between myself, and life

Watery writing that excavates  
Searching from a spring known only in part  
Someone will put me on a nice map with a key  
And describe my shape, but from afar.

Del Negro, poem, Canterbury, 11/02/2015.

I find it intriguing that this poem, which I composed over a year before first drafting this chapter, seems to speak from my subconscious, suggesting the direction that my transformation was to take over the ensuing year of research, long before this became a

reality. However, as the research progressed, it was not to be someone else – my participants, my co-facilitator, my mentors – who put me on a map, as I had perhaps feared at the outset: instead, they gave me the key. And again, this is no description from afar, because *I* am the one telling this story!

At the time, I showed Francesco my drawing and described to him all the developments that I could see in it: circularity, growing interaction with the environment and atmospheric phenomena, the encounter with human life, and the generation of a double spiralling movement that both sounded the depths and expanded into space – there are indeed many resonances between this drawing and the spiral drawn much later by Vanessa and Annabel.

Francesco observed that this drawing might also represent the co-operative research process itself, as a spiral that was developing and reaching towards the sky, also producing confusion and a certain amount of ‘tailspin’ (the ‘spirality’ effect described by Alberto). Indeed, at that stage in the process, I was finding the research question about ‘knowing and professional self-construction’ quite ungraspable, given all its interlacing levels of personal and professional, conscious and unconscious, knowledge and experience, aesthetic and linguistic, transformation and research. Within this vortex, I was also moving through the different ways of knowing for myself (cognitive, practical, affective, intuitive, and increasingly imaginative and aesthetic), and this was giving rise to shifts in my imagination of the researcher within the research process. I depicted this wandering ‘me’ to the bottom right of the drawing: I have no ground under my feet, and am flying away and around. My red body has green lymph, standing for thinking, and blue water pours from my heart – my feet and head are also blue, representing embodied feeling. Cognitive thinking is empty... and ‘lightly held’ like a balloon – representing emotional and cognitive *déplacement* and hopes for playfulness? I took note of these intriguing observations during my reflexive session, to go back to them again as the process unravelled.

### **3) Exploring the potential space**

The crucial operation of ‘experiencing the potential space’ entails, in my view, exploring – via experience and action – the epistemological tenets of co-operative inquiry, trusting that it can be aesthetically mapped – and grasped in this form – through a circular movement of immersion/observation. The researcher extends her explorations of the potential space (Winnicott, 1971) to relevant auto/biographical contexts, consequently grounding her knowledge of the methodology in her life world.

From the third session onwards, we made significant changes to the methodology, as I explained in Chapter Four. I began to feel less concerned about (complying or not complying with) what a systemic facilitator *should* do, and to become more attentive to the context or ‘space’ generated by our research.



Fig. 56 Francesco and I in Bicocca, 20/03/2015.



Fig. 57 Detail of Ailsa's *assemblage* in CCCU, 28/03/2015.

This picture of my co-facilitator and myself is different to that taken before the first session. I took it this time; I am standing at the centre of the image, in full view, in a still and yet dynamic posture in which my body seems just about to walk around the room. Francesco and I look more different to one another, and a different relationship with the research space (and project) is somehow evoked. A large proportion of the research space is visible at our backs, with Fabbri and Munari's (2010) cards lying on the floor, and the circle of chairs holding the participants' *assemblages*. The time of the workshop is also portrayed in some sense, in terms of the changes that have occurred in the setting: the chairs first encircled the cards in the morning; then the *assemblages* were created at the back of the room; and finally, the chairs were moved to the position in which they appear in the photo, so that the *assemblages* could be presented to the group. This picture is to me part of my process of getting to know and constructing the methodology. It is a sort of photographic, spatial-conceptual map of the method – offering imaginative-aesthetic knowing, in Heron's terms (1992). I was now beginning to observe connections within the entire relational, physical, and symbolic 'space' of the research, and how my colleague and myself were positioned in relation to it. I was also proud here, to document our hard work: to source the recycled materials required for the *assemblage* activity, we had had to travel to a town outside Milan.

I was becoming more grounded. The design of the programme was also becoming more shared between us, and with the groups.

The other picture is a detail of the *assemblage* created by Ailsa in CCCU. I took this close-up for my own personal records, as it spoke to me of my immersion in the research process. Ailsa produced her work based on two cards: the Web, and the Wheel of Life – I too had

chosen the latter card, as I discuss shortly. The transformative learning space represented here is messy and colourful, connecting many objects of experience, memories, and feelings.<sup>134</sup> It speaks of the chaotic space of learning that I was experiencing, which was complementary to the tidier representation of the methodology that I see in the photo on the left.

Before these two sessions, I explored the potential of the cards with myself and my family. During a work meeting with my colleague in Bicocca, I looked at the cards piled up on his desk and the card on top caught my eye. I did not *really* choose it; the card felt right and I took a picture of it.



Fig. 58 Del Negro, first choice ‘Wheel of Life’ – Fabbri and Munari’s (2010) Metaphors of Knowledge –, Bicocca, 11/03/2015.

Fig. 59 Del Negro, second choice ‘Wave’ – Fabbri and Munari’s (2010) Metaphors of Knowledge –, Siena, 14/03/2015.

Fig. 60 Mother, ‘Path’ and ‘Labyrinth’ – Fabbri and Munari’s (2010) Metaphors of Knowledge –, Siena, 14/03/2015.

Three days later, I went to visit my mother in Tuscany and chose cards with her. It was a playful and meaningful moment.<sup>135</sup> She chose a Path with a junction, and a concentric Labyrinth; while I chose the wave (one of the Ocean variations) and again the Wheel of Life. We read about the meanings of these metaphors together and discussed our preferences. My cards at the time seemed to me to be more dynamic and unsettled than those chosen by my mother, which gave a greater sense of progression. The Wheel of Life has since come to symbolize for me the ‘good enough’ research space (Winnicott, 1971): it features a circled area of experience, which is maintained through the constant efforts of the professional researcher who both holds *and* observes the space. The facilitator-researcher is both inside

<sup>134</sup> Ailsa represented the space of learning from experience that she tries to construct when she teaches nursing in the University.

<sup>135</sup> I chose not to take pictures during the session with my mother because our encounter with metaphors of knowledge already felt quite emotionally intense, indicating that we were touching (playfully) on something sensitive, at the time, within our relationship as mother and daughter.

and outside the space, continuously moving back and forth between immersion and observation. Alternating these two positions in relation to the research both requires and generates heightened awareness, a more moveable inner space or reflexivity (Hunt, 2013).<sup>136</sup> Perhaps, in the end I did not feel it was necessary to construct my own representation of knowledge because my *lived assemblage* as a professional was that of constructing the research space.

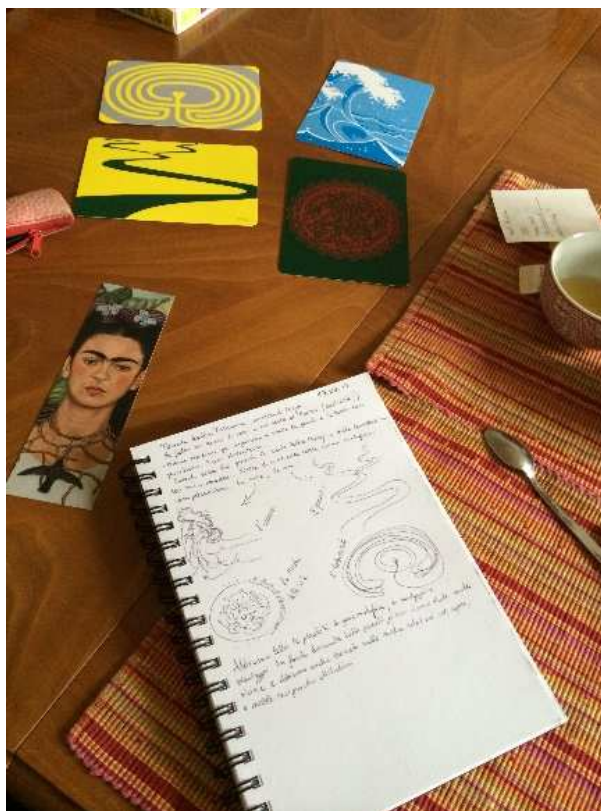


Fig. 61 Notes about my own and my mother's cards, Milan, 17/03/2015.

After visiting my mother in Tuscany, I took a photograph of my reflexive work. Only later did I notice what was actually an evident feature of the picture: an image of the wounded artist Frida Kahlo on a bookmark that I had recently bought at an exhibition. Frida's continuous self-portrayal as, I am tempted to say, a feminist method of 'drawing as inquiry', as well as her difficult relationship with her husband – the accomplished artist Diego Rivera – resonate in part with my auto/biographical experience in this research process with my more professionally established colleague Francesco.<sup>137</sup> Though it may seem like stating the obvious, I would say that this photograph may represent my quest for other – female? – 'critical friends' from different walks of life and knowing to help me seeing the beauty and

<sup>136</sup> The tangle of bodies in the card reminds me of an intensive week of contact dance in 2014 that prompted me to view the body as a space of knowing; since then, besides yoga, I have been practicing dance.

<sup>137</sup> In November 2014, I saw the documentary about her made by Paul Leduc (1986) *Frida, Natureza viva*.

harshness of the quest for self, mind and voice (Belenky *et al.*, 1986) that my research could become, if I embraced its full potential.

After the session in Bicocca, I also visited my father and invited him and his partner to play the game and choose their cards. Again, I explored how accessing aesthetic and imaginative languages generates enhanced dialogue across difference, mitigating reciprocal anxieties. I thus became more aware of idealizations in my family of the ‘intellectual’ who knows; this framing had brought with it feelings of apprehension and of self-depreciation in relation to the other. I began to see connections between my parents’ mixed desires for knowledge and knowledgeable persons, the way that our lives had ‘worked out’ (Richardson, 1997, p. 135) and how I myself had adopted a strategy based on performance at school – my boat had drifted in the most obvious direction. And yet my guiding metaphors were different, tumultuous, and chaotic; was this related to my difficulty to accumulate knowledge – to be a directed learner? What other strategies were hidden inside my intuitive, aesthetic grasp of knowing?

The poem composed by Kate – who had just started her doctorate – stayed with me for some time, although in the beginning I did not like it, and I could not say why. Perhaps it spoke to me about deploying a strategy of irony to resist the pressure, as a doctoral student, of a culture of ‘must know’, as well as ‘must perform’ and ‘be excellent’ (Biesta, 2010).

I don't know what I don't know  
I don't know what you don't know  
And you don't know what I don't know  
But we all think we know what we know.

Kate, poem, CCCU, 28/03/2015.

#### **4) Developing more intimate relationships**

In my view, the crucial step of ‘developing more intimate relationships’ concerns how the researcher relates to self, significant others, different ways of knowing, and the research itself. In this phase, there is a state of mind and being that is fully immersed in the quest; the group mind – participants and facilitators in interaction – seems to resonate with the researcher’s, and important insights occur at the forward edge of openness to the research practice.

The fourth session in Bicocca was a milestone in the co-operative group process, as well as for me personally, because I was confronted with my idealizations of knowledge and experts. The group spontaneously engaged in a conversation around ‘scientific’ knowledge in education, and my co-facilitator smoothed over a request for more theoretical and methodological input with what I saw as a ‘muscular’, although effective, intervention (see the section ‘Initial Conversation’, *supra* pp. 115-116). While listening attentively to this

dialogue, I was aware that the group was expressing my own problem, given that I had to produce a piece of writing for my doctoral programme; my colleague told this to the group, as an example of the resonances of the co-operative mind, and I felt exposed – but did not speak about this. When Francesco later asked me why I had not shared my intuitions with the group, I wondered whether I was concerned not to ‘encumber’ the group with my ideas – so as not to direct it –, or whether I just needed to protect myself from the risk of being ridiculed (Winnicott, 1965). Afterwards we read Borges’s text *Circular Ruins* (Appendix n. 5), which had been given to my colleague by his mentor; they had used it many times in educational settings before his mentor fell ill. As I recounted earlier, when it was Francesco’s turn to read, he could not, and so I read on in his place. It was a very moving moment and an unexpected turn of events that rebalanced our junior and senior facilitation roles in Bicocca. At that moment, I felt that I was holding both the group and Francesco together. Who was feeling exposed now, and what knowledge was helpful?



Fig. 62 Presentation of the portraits of the mentor, Bicocca, 10/04/2015.



Fig. 63 Preparing for the session in CCCU, Canterbury, 17/04/2015.

I took the photo on the left above during the presentations of the portraits of the mentor. I used the mirror at the end of the room to reflect the group and myself: hence my insider position as a subject within the group, and my outsider position of observing researcher are both present.<sup>138</sup> This is the first picture that I took of myself in the group – symbolically through the mirror –; I had felt part of the group this time, and competent in being so. Thanks to this more relaxed attention, I was able to observe that some participants were resting their

<sup>138</sup> Interestingly, another participant is also looking in the mirror at this moment, thereby playing with the two positions of inside and outside. This to me is a sign of how we were learning to be a co-operative research group, to be both subjects *and* researchers. By looking in the mirror at the same time as me, the participant found a solution to the methodological questions asked in the opening conversation of the day (about who knows).



artworks on their legs to show them to the others: an original method that reflected their increasing embodiment of their narratives. The other picture was taken in my room in Canterbury the evening before the session in CCCU. I was reading the English version of Borges's text to my colleague, in order to familiarize with it. I remember feeling confident and affectively close to the text as I prepared myself to bring it to the second group.

I chose my room because I wanted an intimate space for this task, but I now realize that the picture also speaks to me of the lack of space, both physical and symbolic, experienced by my 'self' while I was a doctoral student in Canterbury.

Being away from my hometown felt like being on a long retreat, safe somehow but often painful, with nothing to hide from – relationships and pressures at home – and not much to hide behind – neither mastery of a language, nor work, nor the detachment of the traveller, nor the buzz of city life. While I missed 'experience [coming and having] its say' (Bollas, 2009, p. 84), the research question became a large part of my life, and engaged me at a more intimate level.

In Canterbury I drew my portrait of the Mentor.

Fig. 64 Del Negro, The Mentor, Canterbury, 26/04/2015.



It<sup>139</sup> is bright  
It is distant  
It is powerful  
It is older than me  
It is nourishing  
It is moveable  
It is far-seeing  
It is creative  
It is hidden  
It is unintelligible.

Del Negro, WAY on the Mentor, Canterbury, 26/04/2015.

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<sup>139</sup> I am using the neuter pronoun to refer to my archetype of the Mentor and the idealization which I argue prevented me from meeting or recognizing female and male embodied mentors.

I felt the urge to represent what this archetype of knowing signified for me, symbolically, drawing on literature suggesting that the mentor offers specific characteristics of wandering, melancholy, seduction, missing, passion, and transgression in our relationship with the desired other and his or her knowing (Mottana, 1996). This seemed to reveal something about my relationship with myself as a learner, and with the desired other. In drawing the portrait, I saw, perhaps for the first time, how powerful my idealization was: the Mentor is a guiding star, a celestial mediator of the knowledge of the universe. It creates a bridge with the earth, it is an eternal pulse, and is in communion with the ancestors of human thinking and with the seasons of biological life. In my drawing, I might be one of the kites forming below, not yet a star; the symbolic meaning of the representation is still mysterious to me.

In my journal, I noted that the sessions on the Mentor had been particularly meaningful to me on a personal and professional level. During the lunch break in Bicocca, I had told my colleague about my difficulty in thinking about mentorship, given that I personally felt I had no mentors – like Vanessa at the beginning.<sup>140</sup> Francesco suggested that perhaps I was a difficult mentee because I situated myself at the same level as the mentor – was he speaking about our relationship? Curiously I found this true, together with the opposite feeling of inferiority with respect to the mentor's knowledge. This paradox began to shed light for me on my burning desire to be knowledgeable like my mentor, while remaining at a distance from unknown knowledge as a threat to my sense of being valuable – possibly a common professional issue (Bainbridge, 2012). Like Vanessa, I wanted to trust myself to meet my mentor and dialogue more openly with him or her from our different embedded positions.

This personal work on my 'self' made my body quite tense during the session in Bicocca – I kept crossing my legs on my chair. Yet I felt the work to be very deep, and I observed cognitive and affective shifts in the participants' descriptions of *their* mentors. By the session in CCCU, I had become able to offer more of my own thoughts to the group, and think together with the participants because I was more mindfully present.

### **5) Repositioning inside the group mind**

By 'repositioning inside the group mind', I mean the crucial operation of going beyond what seemed to be 'the forward edge of openness to experience and practice' (Heron, 1996, p. 73) and trusting the co-operative process of the 'we' to work through obstacles and incidents. In this phase, the researcher has fully entered the research process, and begins to bring her voice, heart, intellect and body to the inquiry, repositioning as co-researcher inside of the group,

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<sup>140</sup> Although I had had some significant professional relationships with more experienced people during my life, these had been relatively short-term; at a personal level, on the other hand, I often look up to older and more experienced people as role models that can help me to reflect on my own life.

while also enacting more creative forms of caring. Problems may be reframed, and roles composed.

The weekend session brought to the fore a number of themes related to the context, how a co-operative group learns, and difficulties in facilitating the group. This paragraph draws on two reflexive texts on the facilitation, written by Francesco and myself after the weekend and then exchanged, at my suggestion. I summarize here aspects of learning that emerge from the texts, focusing on negotiations of voice and self within the research space. The programme for the weekend had been largely informed by my colleague's expertise in using performative languages in adult research and education, and generated an interesting effect.

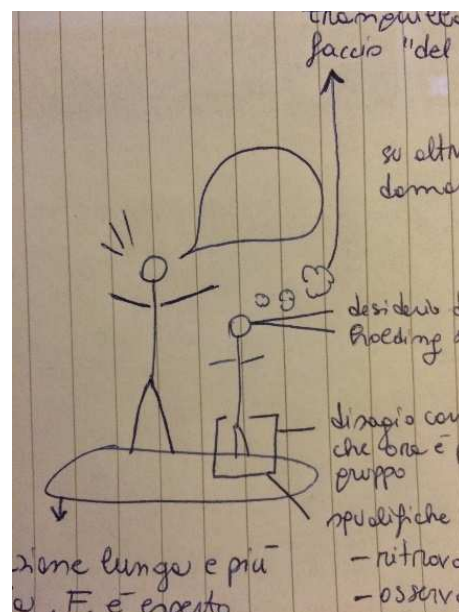
There was an effect for me of seeing myself as though in a mirror [generated by the methodology and by my comparison of my own and my colleague's expertise], an effect which was not conscious but enacted; I saw my own functioning as learner and professional researcher, exemplified *there* on the research scene. (Del Negro, reflexive text, Canterbury, 23/05/2015)

We had worked very intensively together to design the activities. I was nervous about not having used these research methods before, and also a bit unclear about what I could do with this session in my thesis - what 'data' would be generated, and would I use them?

Here on the left we see my colleague enjoying a break outside of the room in which we worked, with a participant beside him. In the drawing – attached to my reflexive text –, my colleague and myself are represented in relation to each other and to the space, in the act of speaking and thinking. I am the small figure uncomfortably standing inside a box: I observe and think but do not talk. The tall figure is my colleague: he stands in a theatrical pose, speaks out and is in full performance.



Fig. 65 Francesco at the intensive weekend, Bicocca, 10/05/2015.



I had put myself in the position of observing Francesco's work while he offered his specific competence in using theatre in education according to a clinical-educational approach. Mine was a posture of paying attention to him and to the group, yet at times I felt excluded by his assertive way of conducting the session and his instructing me to do things differently to how I was doing them. In addition, my unfamiliarity with the method made it difficult for me to interact – I did not dare to contribute. I see this as exemplified in one particular incident: Francesco's 'theatrical'<sup>141</sup> invitation to the Bicocca group to meet the other group in Canterbury in the spring 2016 – which I thought premature. This improvised invitation put me in an uncomfortable position, as I felt that I could not join him in inviting the group, given that the two of us had not previously discussed that possibility. Was I being too rigid or was I developing my own ethics?

Aside from my struggles, the weekend was successful and I was actually happy with the work. During the lunch break I realized, however, that I was a stranger to the discourses and lives of the Milanese participants – I had been away for so long – so that only the workshop space felt safe, giving me a sense that I belonged in what we were doing.

The weekend in CCCU was more difficult, as described earlier (see Chapter Seven). Having been through the equivalent session in Bicocca, I felt more competent to give indications to the group – as opposed to instructions, thus composing my facilitator and co-researcher roles. I felt helpful, and even necessary when the critical incident occurred during the theatrical warm-up and improvisation (see paragraph 'Fifth step: "Playing"', supra pp. 170-173).

Here a change became evident in Francesco's and my own perceptions of expert knowledge and roles, as I represented in the two images below.

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<sup>141</sup> In my eyes, Francesco was less concerned with the 'reality' of the research that we had constructed in the group, and more ready to see something special and spectacular that might be produced (a *coup de théâtre*). I wondered if he had recognized an authentic desire on the part of the group in that moment that could have subsequently been built upon, or if he had played to some extent with seducing and being seduced by desires in the group.



Fig. 67 Me during the intensive weekend, CCCU, 16/05/2015.

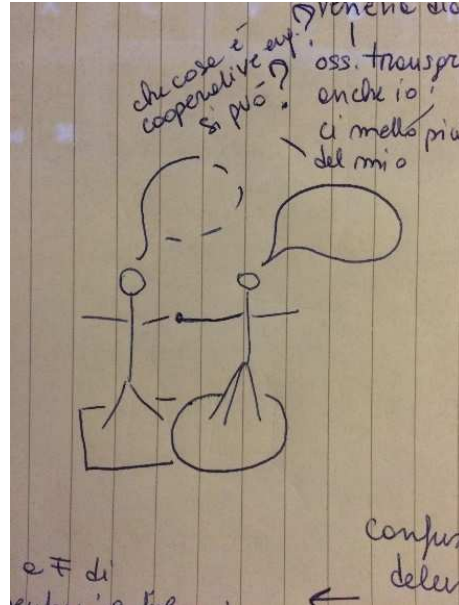


Fig. 68 Del Negro, drawing about facilitating in CCCU, Canterbury, 23/05/2015.

The picture on the left I took by mistake while listening to the narratives inside the map. To me this picture expresses the process of becoming more one with the researching group. Sensing some embarrassment on the part of the participants in relation to coming ‘on stage’ and telling their stories of learning, I leant forward in my chair to support the narration, listening with my whole person – feeling, intuiting, understanding, acting (Heron, 1992) –and drawing on embodied and connected knowing (Belenky *et al.*, 1986) to facilitate the group.

I give it my good ear. I move with the whole body, listening, supporting the stories. I respond to the physical presence of the narrators in the map, in front of us, with my attentively relaxed body ... Is this a “motherly” way of being in the researcher/facilitator’s shoes? (Del Negro, reflexive text, Canterbury, 23/05/2015)

During the theatrical improvisation, the group encountered some difficulty as described in Chapter Seven, partly due to a lack of guidance, but managed to produce a performance that they were satisfied with. It seemed that something ‘good enough’ – supportive of processes of self-making and transformation (Winnicott, 1971) – was still going on in a co-operative way. During the lunch break, Vanessa asked Francesco if the group in Bicocca had also hugged each other at the end of the improvisation exercise. Francesco was still a bit shaken by the experience of not being able to direct the theatrical work as he had hoped, but this frank question set off an informal co-operative conversation in which *we* – both inside-outside of our roles and expertise – could speak about the difficulties of working in another language and a different cultural context.

I perceive this as a moment of co-operative inquiry. We speak ... (Del Negro, reflexive text, Canterbury, 23/05/2015)

Now I felt the urgency of lending all my support to the group to provide a holding space for them in uncertain waters. The drawing above represents this new balance between different ‘experts’ on the research scene: while the figure of my colleague produces somewhat unclear discourse, mine stands on three legs – like the goddess of creation-destruction Kali, symbolizing to me a knowledge of interconnection, circularity, unbalance, and transformation. She speaks clearly while she offers an object – a transitional object (Bollas, 2009; Mosconi, 1996; Winnicott, 1971)? – to the other figure. I remember asking my colleague to introduce Zilberman’s film *A Late Quartet* in recognition of his clinical-educational expertise,<sup>142</sup> and then sitting in complete stillness and total attention for the duration of the film. My professional choice, as facilitator and researcher, was to trust in the process, despite anxieties about not ‘being good’, valuing our shared action as a group of co-researchers experiencing a film together – which had been chosen with great care –, and seeing where that might lead *us*.

We are all spectators in precarious conditions, as a group and as individuals: together we give life to the moment. (Del Negro, reflexive text, Canterbury, 23/05/2015)

The participants commented positively on the weekend although it had been challenging for some to get used to the performative languages proposed. These events made me realize that I was beginning to understand caring in a co-operative way. Care was not in me, and it was not in Francesco, nor in the participants. Everyone took care of everyone else, as the flux of our interaction functioned as a ‘collective mind’,<sup>143</sup> creating a space that was ‘good enough’ (Winnicott, 1971) for us, and allowing each of us to experience some positive dynamic of becoming through relating to the group. We had overcome many crises to learn this structural coupling (Maturana, 1990), and had come to accept our clumsiness (Sclavi, 2003) as co-researchers. The personal and professional learning offered by the research was also important to Francesco, who wrote reflexively:

I’ve had to fully challenge my assumptions, my theoretical and practical premises, my implicit epistemologies, my formative and knowing phantoms ... and recompose the parts of my professional self in a moment in which, also

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<sup>142</sup> This was the method chosen to work on the film (see supra pp. 82, 89).

<sup>143</sup> See the clarification of the term in Chapter One, section ‘Micro, meso, macro’, supra pp. 30-33.

thanks to the international part of the experience, I activated a transformation of my space of knowledge and action. (Cappa, reflexive text, Milan, 23/05/2015)

The key learning expressed here is that research happens within the lived context, and prior assumptions, anxieties about what might happen, performance, assertion and so on gravitate in the research space as we bring all of ourselves into it, largely unconsciously. Unexpectedly, I took care of my ‘expert’ colleague too.

### **Ethical dilemmas associated with relational reflexivity**

This kind of research poses the researcher with ethical dilemmas, or paradoxes that cannot be easily resolved, in the areas of facilitation (questions of power), analysis (questions of truth), and representation of the data (questions of trust). In my own work, following von Foerster’s ethical imperative,<sup>144</sup> I drew on a situational, reflexive, and relational strategy that I term ‘relational reflexivity’. At each step in the enquiry process, I needed to make here-and-now ethical decisions by questioning my actions and asking the participants for their views. In this section, I outline the dilemmas that I encountered and the solutions that I identified, so as to illustrate the ethical implications of adopting a relational reflexive stance.

#### *Facilitation: the participants are free yet are told what to do*

This dilemma concerned the inherent ambiguity in the research methodology as to whether it involved collectively carrying out the enquiry process or me leading the group to conduct particular activities. Cooperative research frameworks are meant to entail the researcher initially providing ‘structures and processes’ (Reason, 1988, p. 27) to ensure ‘effective group work’ (ibid), while facilitating increasing levels of ‘non-dependent collaborative reflection and management’ (Heron, 1996, p. 65). However, on analysing the material, I realised that this approach had only worked in part. As earlier outlined, competition arose among the facilitators, to which I contributed by embracing the imaginary of the intellectual and the researcher who know what they are doing – while my complex research design (running two cooperative enquiry groups over an eight-month period) masked an anxiety about coping with the unexpected. The methodology also turned out to provide me as researcher with transitional spaces (of writing) that were more protected than the spaces afforded to the participants: ‘we make others vulnerable but we ourselves remain invulnerable’ (Behar, 1996, in Etherington, 2004, p. 22). In this chapter, I reflect on the fact that the researcher is simultaneously positioned both inside and outside the cooperative enquiry process (Heron and Reason, 2006), observing that the ‘cognitive displacement’ (Fabbri and Munari, 2009) which

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<sup>144</sup> See infra p. 24.



takes place in facilitation can produce power dynamics: the facilitator shields him or herself while displacing the other.

I adopted a metacommunication strategy with my groups of participants: the practice of ‘checking in’ with them at the beginning of each session enabled us to discuss what was working and what was not. As I became increasingly more reflexive in outlook, I learned to make ethical choices in real time, and this helped me to listen more attentively to the negotiation process (Belenky and Stanton, 2000) that was unfolding in the groups, as expressed for example by members’ frequent absences. Marianella Sclavi’s (2003) notion of embarrassment provided a key for me to ethically position myself within crisis situations, as a learner and as a researcher engaged in relating to others.<sup>145</sup>

*Analysis: how would have subjects analysed their own material?*

Analysing the research material raised the dilemma of how to reconcile my analytical approach with a radical constructivist epistemological framework positing a ‘relational truth’ that is perennially under construction in the here and now of interaction among subjects. The analysis was intersubjective to the extent that it took place within the cooperative enquiry process, but subsequently I was obliged to choose which parts of the research material to focus on and how, as a function of my own methodological and interpretative lens. The ‘ethic of care’ perspective (Gilligan, 1982) defines identity as ‘experience of interconnection’ (ibid. p. 173), implying that social researchers should never objectify what they analyse but rather attend to the meanings that flow in the relationship between self and other. On the other hand, conducting our analysis based on the relationship (‘/’) between ourselves and the other does not save us from the ‘danger of constructing the other in the light of our own needs or political agendas’ (Merrill and West, 2009, p. 177). The debate on the practicability of universal ethical guidelines versus situational and localized ethical practices (Cannella and Lincoln, 2011; 2007) concerns all types of qualitative research.

As I interacted with my research subjects, I became aware of the limitations of my ‘initial’ formal ethical stance. In practice, ethics in qualitative research ‘has nothing to do with informed consent’ (Speedy, 2008, p. 39). Rather it exposes the researcher to the risks and dilemmas of self and other relations, requiring him or her to continuously make ethical judgements as the research unfolds. In relation to my analysis of the research material, I was hindered both by having to write in a foreign language to half of the participants – and myself – and, as other cooperative researchers have experienced (Treleaven, 1994), by my fear that in sharing my ideas, my line of reasoning and nascent theories would become lost or obscured. At the end of the analysis phase, I still had not shared the full text of my

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<sup>145</sup> See infra p. 237.

dissertation with the participants, and so, despite informal exchanges with them, numerous points remained unclear. Therefore, as I now report, I asked them for their opinions of the text.

*Representation: when the subjects read my thesis paper, will it make sense to them?*

Writing about research is problematic because it can easily become an attempt to ‘pin down’ reality, thereby objectifying it. The dilemma of ‘how to document becoming’ (Richardson, 2005, p. 966) is an open question that applies to all interpretative research (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011). I sought to identify a third route, in between critical distancing and Bateson’s (open-ended) thinking in terms of stories. This is the aesthetic-analytical route, a middle ground between making poetry and doing research. I experimented with the method of writing as inquiry (Richardson, 1997) so as to ‘feel [my] way’ (ibid. p. 53) through the material and present it to others as personal, local, and embodied knowledge. In poetic writing, there is room for multiple interpretations by different subjects, over time, thanks to the care for symbolic space that is generated in the interaction between subjects and the texts that represent them. In art, this space is defined as ‘liminal’ because it connects ‘artist, medium and audience ... [generating] a kind of stepping into unknown places’ (Speedy, 2008, p. 29). When one’s field of research is not separable from the lives of those involved (Tillman, 2011), the ethics of representation becomes situational, reflexive, and relational. This is why I asked myself: *If the participants read my thesis paper, will it make sense to them?*

*A methodological development: collaborative assessment*

These and other unresolved questions pushed me to reflect more deeply on who is given voice in academic research and our difficulty in embracing research practices that are more collaborative and open to uncertainty and change, that is to say, forms of relational reflexivity. Without laying claim to research data status for them, I now present – albeit in summary form due to space constraints – a set of texts that appear to me to offer a methodological solution to the problems that I have presented. Some months after I had shared the full text of the thesis with all the participants, in May 2017 I chose to individually invite (Appendix n. 7) the four case-study participants to join me in conducting a collaborative assessment of their research experience, in which ‘both of us [had] agency’ (Etherington, 2004, p. 36). All of them except Vanessa agreed to reread the chapter that concerned them (either in English or translated into Italian as appropriate),<sup>146</sup> to discuss it

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<sup>146</sup> It goes without saying that translating the narratives from Italian into English for representation presented epistemological and ethical issues, including the risk of exceedingly betraying the original material, its associations and beauty.

with me without our conversation being audio-recorded, and to jointly prepare a short report of this discussion. The full texts of these reports are provided below. In all three cases, I prepared a draft version which Federico, Beatrice and Dilbert then revised and extended.

*Federico\* and Gaia:* For Federico, rereading the text had represented a necessary step towards rethinking the narrative workshop experience and for this reason he now viewed it as a crucial exercise that, in retrospect, might usefully have been included in the formative dispositive itself. He said that my interpretation of his formative trajectory was 'obvious' given that creatively experiencing emotional and embodied knowledge is bound to generate a shift from rational to more integrated forms of knowing. In contrast, he had found it stimulating to contemplate how I had gone about analysing the change, in particular on pp. 133-137 where I described the assemblage of participants' metaphor of knowledge, and their engagement with the circular ruins of José Luis Borges and the portrait of a mentor. In these two instances, according to Federico, participants had experienced a mode of 'performative thinking' that entailed agreeing to do things without asking themselves why: this had allowed them to access portions of their past in a way that was less mediated by the categories of the present. Together, we speculated about the type of reflection that may be generated by performative experience. We wondered if his research (on narrative education) was different from mine and in what way. He recommended that I read a book about neuroaesthetics and embodied cognition he believed could help me to further develop these ideas. He suggested that if I had focused on a smaller number of aesthetic objects, I could have provided a more in-depth analysis of how they had functioned as creative/formative dispositives. We also explored the questions of individual positioning within the groups and the interaction among participants that I had attempted to thematize in my analysis. Federico's feeling was that I had retained most of the power to make decisions about the 'cooperative' enquiry process, thus limiting the participants' scope for independent initiative and making them reliant on me to know what to do. This prompted me to mention my own reflections about how the dimension of institutional power and my tendency to idealize the figure of the intellectual had come into play in my relationship with Francesco. Federico was struck by my rationale for choosing to conduct part of my enquiry in a different institutional, cultural and linguistic context. And by the fact that I had shared the full text of my dissertation with all the participants. We both enjoyed the exchange, and before parting agreed to get back in touch with a view to joining forces this autumn to organize a seminar on the cultural turn in adult education.

*Beatrice\* and Gaia:* Beatrice had been taken aback to encounter the real me in the text, in comparison with the reserved manner and aura of 'expertise' that she had associated with me during the narrative workshops. So 'Gaia' was part of the enquiry too! She was also a little surprised by my analysis of her 'psychological' dimension. I explained to her why I had chosen to adopt a reflexive approach and asked her if she had perceived an involuntary

overlap between my story and hers. She had read the two stories as interacting, in a way that was respectful of her while stimulating her to reflect, something that she herself sets out to achieve in her own educational work, although she is not confident that she always succeeds. I clarified to Beatrice that my theoretical framework of analysis had its roots in auto/biographical analysis and had gradually been enriched by other theoretical perspectives that shed light on idealizations and hierarchies of knowledge. For Beatrice, the cycle of workshops had coincided with a turning point in her professional career, and the creative methods of enquiry deployed in them had provided her with new – less cognitive – tools for addressing the decision that she needed to make. Her subsequent move from her former position as a social services coordinator to working as a freelance consultant suggests to her that she has acquired greater confidence in her own intuition. We asked ourselves what it was that had provided her and me with the security or the stimuli we had needed to move towards a more alive, embodied and open-ended form of knowing, agreeing that the question invoked a relatively unexplored territory of identification and falling in love that embraced both the public and private spheres. Beatrice saw the resonance between our two stories as the aspect of the text that most contributed to opening new avenues of reflection. Rereading the text had helped her to overcome the 'disappointment' associated with the disbanding of the cooperative group: this group had been generated by a personal question that was explored together before going back to being individuals again. This input from Beatrice led me to reflect on the time and care required to allow the emergence of individual subjectivities and to foster their development within communities whose lifespan is short, such as in educational counselling and social research settings.

*Dilbert\* and Gaia:* Dilbert had prepared some notes for our discussion. Whilst he resonated with some of my interpretations, he claimed that the assumptions I made were too large. The functional perspective he sometime reproduced was exacerbated by promotion and the increasing dominance of 'whole school' accountability, the dominant values during the course of a school evaluation – as well as when engaging with OFSTED and the Department for Education. To idealistically promote personal growth, awareness, creativity and discovery above the expression of data and the language of progress would be considered naive. Therefore, Dilbert felt comfortable with the research exercises in and of themselves, but struggled with their relevance within secondary schools. As the course developed, however, he felt that he could justify and 'create' a place for such exercises and the 'valuable' (i.e. could contribute to progress) awareness that they developed.

In the text, he felt being positioned by me in contrast to Vanessa, a rather convenient representation of the technocratic environment – in opposition to the creative freedom of the Art Therapist. In fact, he was comfortable with the creative space, but initially struggled to place the creative space within the technocratic discourse of his experience, which would (and

is at present) be its arena of operation. The research methodology focused on the self in a space outside of technically determined expectations and, as such, enabled an expression of self within its own localised terms. However, to extend notions of this self, in an idealised space, to the restrictions of the Neoliberal spaces felt false to him, because it fails to acknowledge the necessary creativity of adaptation that is particular. Finally, we noticed how the methodology lacks ad hoc reflexive spaces enabling people to link enactment and interpretation, self and discourse. A space or spaces of this sort would acknowledge the nature of adaptation but perhaps revealing a collection of consistent values that determine the expression of each professional adaptation. Establishing a space within which these values can be found and articulated without compromise is, perhaps, for the participant, one of the most valuable achievements of the methodology.

This form of assessment exemplifies how we may feasibly and caringly follow up on cooperative research, putting the facilitator's extra time and resources to good use by individually offering each participant a text through which to re-read their experience.

### **Summary**

My journey has involved becoming a good-enough facilitator/researcher in co-operative inquiry and perhaps in adult education. I have identified some crucial operations (Fabbri and Munari, 1990) – tasting difference, entering the spiral, exploring the potential space, developing more intimate relationships, and repositioning inside the group mind – which I have defined and illustrated, offering them as a heuristic map for questioning processes of professional becoming, through the ‘good’ towards the ‘good-enough’ researcher and adult educator.

This path had to do with becoming more permeable and present, and less controlling/fearful in relation to the group and process, which I learnt to trust – and to recognize as ethically dilemmatic. I also recognized and overcame, in part, anxieties about not knowing and being ridiculed for it, in a public space, as I uncovered my idealizations of the ‘expert’ and embraced instead a variety of interpretations of ‘expert action’ in a specific, dynamic context. Knowing and research became highly uncertain practices in my eyes, and I accepted ‘playing’ with academic knowledge and ‘culture’ in a transitional way (Winnicott, 1971). This meant developing a more affective and imaginative relationship with my research, with myself inside of it. In the process, I allowed myself to draw and to compose poems as a key research practice, although it took me a long time to feel secure in doing this.

Finally, the work on mentors helped me to contact less conscious and competitive aspects of my self, and particularly my ‘unmentionable’ desire to become a knowledgeable expert and a very good professional. Hence, I can now tell a story about hiding from knowing in my

younger years (see Chapter Three), and early on in the research, but also about searching for a different epistemological position. Desires became mentionable – and part of a more integrated ‘playing’ with knowing and self – in the process of encountering my own and my family’s stories of knowing. In my relationship with Francesco, I was challenged by experiencing gender and power issues in research, and learnt not to make a simplistic use of these categories, but to become attentive to the complexity of knowing with others with different embodied experiences – hence feminist questions accompanied me, albeit silently. Overall I became more dubious, and yet more hopeful, about the possibility of constructing research that is ‘truly’ co-operative, in the sense of having a less idealized idea of what truly co-operative research informed by a systemic-constructivist approach *should* be, and thus more open to seeing what it *can* be as a situated and contextualized practice.

Going back to the roots of my own relationship with knowing, I can see that the idealized ‘intellectual’ circulated as a family myth during my upbringing, and that not knowing enough was difficult because it reflected some sort of personal and social failure.<sup>147</sup> Therefore, a strategy of clumsiness in research (Sclavi, 2003) was key to dismantling held assumptions. Some metaphors that I produced auto/biographically gave me an intuitive grasp of a viable path: the snake that was hidden in my drawing of the sea-soul (see supra p. 74), the wheel of life, and the knitted blanket imagined in conversation with my mother (see supra p. 63). Making a composition of these, I have noticed that the sacred snake, represented in circular form as eating its tail, holds the wheel of life. My mother used to call me little snake (*serpentella*) in my teens, as I always had cold hands, but this has changed in recent months – languaging happens in corporeality, for Maturana (1990). Have I been learning to craft my knowing, by knitting together different transitional objects?

In March 2016, I presented at a conference in South Korea<sup>148</sup> and this helped me to bring into sharper focus the guiding principles of my professional learning, which I later composed in poetic form.

Stemming from the experience of co-operatively inquiring with others, it stands for me now as my own professional manifesto at the end of this research, extending beyond the research into my future as researcher and *formateur*, and God knows what else.

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<sup>147</sup> I suspect that the myth was born of specific interactions that took place at the biographical level, as well as involving political and socioeconomic dimensions of class and gender, and I appreciate the personal and political struggles that my parents went through to weave and challenge their relationships with knowing.

<sup>148</sup> The 5th International Conference of Culture, Biography & Lifelong Learning. Induck Hall, Pusan National University (PNU), Busan, South Korea, Research Network CBLL, 17<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> March 2016.

Move from performing to creative playing  
Accept the dark aspects of desire, competitiveness, and hate  
Choose good friends theoretical and 'real'

Clean your tools and keep them near  
Occupy space with rights and responsibilities  
– While wanting/not wanting to take risks and to grow –

Live and love and research in uncertainty  
Bring imagination, humour, and sensuality into a sacred whole  
The sensory wellspring of all knowing is acting.

Del Negro, poem, Milan, 17/09/2016

## ***Conclusion***

All knowledge is constructed, and the knower is an intimate part of the known. (Belenky *et al.*, 1986, p. 137)

### **Introduction**

In these concluding pages, I reflexively present and discuss the outcomes of my study. They support, as I shall argue, my initial claim that education professionals are profoundly affected by critical issues of idealization, power, and alienation; however, they also display resources, such as curiosity, irony, desire, and the capacity to engage with culture.

The findings produced by my analysis of the participants' learning experiences, as well as my own self-reflexivity, significantly contribute to the understanding of how professionals in education build/transform their identities and relationships to knowing, in a dialectic between idealization and critical thinking, external pressures and self-positioning. The study sheds light on the personal in the professional, and on education professionals' struggle to resist hegemonic discourses of professional knowing.

In the following paragraphs, I report on what I have learnt from the experience of implementing, across two different cultural contexts, a co-operative setting (Heron, 1996) to foster reflexivity and potentially transformative learning processes in two groups of education professionals. Combining critical discursive practices with aesthetical languages and an auto/biographical perspective offers the potential, I now claim, to elicit awareness and expression of professionals' relationship to knowing. My argument is that educators' 'habitual' condition of alienation from personal knowing needs to be challenged and addressed via engagement with more authentic and reflexive modes of *formation* – involving a 'relaxed kind of intentionality [...] giving rise to conscious reflection and action' (Hunt, 2013, p. 67).

In Chapters Five to Eight, I presented multiple case studies of one and the 'same' process of inquiry, in keeping with the principle of 'double description' (Bateson, 1979, p. 64): this allowed me to explore the co-operative process, and its outcomes, from different perspectives, and brought to light, as I shall summarize here, two generative routes into knowing and professional becoming. These were: a multidisciplinary approach to inquiry, and multimodal professional development practice. I now go on to offer recommendations to researchers in the field of education and beyond who wish to adopt a theoretical and practical approach that is respectful of the integral and complex nature of knowledge – in other words, an approach that is informed by the notion that it is not imperative to divide interdependent aspects of the human experience of living. The methodological outcomes of my research suggest the ingredients required to construct an authentic learning context, which include: aesthetic



reflexivity, writing as inquiry, good enough spaces, cultural objects, and a five-step model of spiralling that may be applied within and beyond the field of education. Ethical remarks are offered throughout this summary account. Finally, I close with a more personal evaluation of my quest.

To put my conclusions into context, I begin by outlining how my theoretical vision has changed, during and thanks to my research, with respect to what I had in mind at the outset: that is to say, I now review the theories and concepts on which I drew, stating how I interpreted and composed them, and how they became modified through my own and others' engagement in the co-operative inquiry process.

### **An interdisciplinary pathway towards a satisfying theory**

How was my theory built during the research process and how does it continue to develop? Inevitably the spiral goes on spiralling, because the interpretative process is open-ended. Like others who have used 'writing as inquiry' before me, 'I do not feel that these concluding pages can offer a neat summary of my search [...]. That search goes on beyond the limits of this exploration' (Fraser, 2013, p. 223). While viewing knowledge from a constructivist perspective (Maturana, 1990) as a provisional balance in the process of living, in drawing my conclusions from this research I believe that a theory was produced that is subjectively 'satisfying' for me, because it has the characteristics of a good theory – which I have been using as a frame of reference since Chapter One – identified by Alberto Munari:

A satisfying theory is a coherent system of conceptualizations, strategies, and actions, with which a subject can provide an explanation, from both the cognitive and the moral and practical viewpoints, of the world in which he or she lives and operates. (Munari, 1993, p. 61, my translation)

The theme of subjectivity, and inter-subjectivity, as the active construction of knowledge by interacting subjects, is a crucial one for my research. My own subjectivity was involved in chronicling the ongoing transformation of my theory at every step in my enquiry. This way of thinking about, and working with, professional knowing and identity feels theoretically satisfying, and operationally generative, because it opens a pathway, for me as an engaged learner, researcher, and educator, towards new strategies, awareness, and actions. From a complexity perspective, it might be said that my theorizing has been 'inquiry-driven', because it started from a specific issue in the literature – and in my own life –, and unfolded by 'draw[ing] on pertinent knowledge across disciplines as a way to address the complexity of lived experience' (Montuori and Donnelly, 2016, p. 753).

In order to familiarize myself with the problematic issues in my field, the first step in my journey was to engage with the sociological debate about professional lives in education in uncertain neoliberal times, and the increasing sense of alienation among education professionals with respect to the meaning of their practice and the construction of their professional identities. I reported the concerns expressed by many about current trends towards greater bureaucratization and performativity, as signalled for example by research in higher education and schools (Ball and Olmedo, 2013; Furedi, 2009; Gewirtz *et al.*, 2009; Barnett, 2011; 2008; 2000; Ball, 2003; Doyle, 2003; Readings, 1996). Ronald Barnett (2011) has spoken about a loss of ‘mystery’ in how learning and knowing are understood in higher education since its colonization by neoliberal discourses of measurability and explicitness. Professionals experience multiple competing pressures to be knowledgeable as well as accountable to a variety of stakeholders (Barnett, 2008), and find their authority undermined by feelings of inadequacy. These external discourses contribute to making professionals feel trapped inside narrow, or even negative and self-limiting relationships with knowledge, alienating them from emotion, feeling and intuition. In his work on higher education, Barnett (2011) explored ways of revitalizing learning as becoming, which he views as a form of deeply participative, self-ironic, and holistic ‘knowledge of being’ (*ibid.* p. 13) that is key to educational work, although it is being squeezed out by pressures to proceduralize education. My general aim in engaging with these frameworks was to explore the relationship to knowing and with oneself as a knower, as it is experienced by professionals in education. I also wished to investigate the conditions that might favour a more embodied understanding of oneself and one’s practice (Formenti *et al.*, 2014).

In order to make sense for myself of what a ‘knowledge of being’ might entail, I set out to develop a multifaceted theoretical lens, ultimately drawing together ideas from authors across several different disciplinary fields, such as: sociologist Bernard Charlot (1997) and his concept of negotiating who we are and how we know within a social space; educationalist John Heron’s (1992) ‘congruent knowledge’; the thinking of feminist social researchers Mary Field Belenky and colleagues (1986) about ‘connected’ and ‘constructed knowing’; and psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott’s (1971; 1965) work on the ‘true self’.

Following an emergent approach to literature review, I slowly worked to construct a ‘multidisciplinary perspective’ (Montuori, 2005, p. 381) by reflexively exploring different approaches, their possible integration, and applications. Throughout this thesis, I have shown that a multidisciplinary framework has the power to richly refract the data from the inside, offering many possible (von Foerster, 1973) ways to make sense of the research experience. This in itself is good research practice according to a constructivist and systemic ethics whereby reality is believed to be too intricate to be captured from a single perspective, and disciplinary boundaries are seen as a faulty guide to making sense of the world we live in.

Bateson (1979; 1972), too, warned against engaging with life phenomena through a monodisciplinary lens, and of course this is a ruling principle for transdisciplinary research, for example in the field of investigating creativity (Montuori and Donnelly, 2016). I am not interested here in striving to distinguish between inter- and trans-disciplinarity, itself a debated issue (Hessel and van Lente, 2008); furthermore, the latter approach's declared aim of working towards 'the co-evolution of a common guiding framework [...] more than only the cooperation of different disciplines' (ibid. p. 751) is a highly ambitious one. Nonetheless, my doctoral research work leads me to come down in favour of reconceptualising the relationship to knowledge and academic work as a creative endeavour that unfolds in and between disciplines rather than mirroring traditional disciplinary divides (Barnett and Bengsten, 2017).

From my own theoretical perspective, intertwining views from different disciplinary fields may be conceived as engaging with different forms of knowing (or transitional objects), each of which exists and has value 'inside of and thanks to [its] social institution' (Mosconi, 1996, p. 96). Consequently, inter/trans-disciplinary academic work – by drawing together different forms of knowing – may be viewed as creating potentially 'transitional texts', that is to say, research narratives with the potential to give their authors and readers access to multiple ways of sense- and self-making. This point will become clearer as the chapter develops and I systematically sum up my findings and methodological recommendations concerning the use of transitional spaces, cultural objects, and writing in social research.

However, a critical evaluation of this research demands that I also acknowledge some key limitations of my approach. Drawing together what discrete disciplines treat separately has at times hindered the development of my thinking. For example, the theoretical lens of biologist Maturana's (1990) concept of 'linguaging' did not help me to draw out the role of power in knowing and language, but on the contrary kept power relations partly hidden from view. At the same time, personal factors – such as dichotomous thinking; fearing yet desiring to know; migration, gendered and class stories in my family; and my strategy of coping by 'hiding' from knowing – conditioned my way of wearing the lens. Only as the research unfolded did I begin to transition towards a more integrated approach.

### **Conceptualizing and overcoming idealizations of self and knowing**

As I noted in Chapters Six and Eight, compositions of the self from a perspective of complexity and becoming (Formenti *et al.*, 2014; West, 1996) are inevitably the uncertain result of a continuous quest. This was confirmed by my analysis of the cooperative workshops, and even more so by the material produced by the four case-study participants, who all seemed to experience some form of self-integration – though each in a different way

– as an effect of the inquiry process. A key feature of all these professionals’ productions was the idealization of knowledge and knowledgeable others.

As exemplified by Beatrice’s struggles in her work as the coordinator of a social services cooperative, and her urgent sense of needing to know and act like an ‘expert’, idealizations of knowledge can block practitioners, while more autonomous choices may be encouraged by trusting one’s intuition and ‘holistic cognition’ (Heron, 1992, p. 17). I have argued here that idealizations and stereotypes of ‘impossible’ (exclusive, rationalistic) spaces of learning and self-making can prevent archetypal ‘outsiders’, such as the art therapist Vanessa, from activating intellectual knowing and operating professionally in the academic context. A more permeable use of different ways of knowing helped Vanessa to translate her previous learning/identity into an academic context and cross the boundaries between systems – thus becoming more like a constructivist knower (Belenky *et al.*, 1986). The narratives of Dilbert and Federico, an established lecturer and a young researcher respectively, suggested that intellectual discourses in one’s discipline may be reproduced while leaving the self out, producing alienated (and often unhappy) forms of professional identity. In the course of the workshops, some form of integration happened for both these participants, via the unearthing of their personal imaginations of knowing, and of the places they *feel* they occupy in the world.

My interpretation of these data resonates with Linden West’s psychosocial study of GPs (family physicians) in Southern England, which identified discourses of the doctor as an omnipotent hero. Doctors’ idealizations may also arise ‘partly as a defence against fears of inadequacy and their own emotional difficulties’ (West, 2004, p. 301), whilst biographical research may illuminate more of what ‘in reality, [they] *may need to know*, including the place of the self and emotional understanding’ (ibid. my italics). Professional socialization into an intellectual model that overlooks more subjective ways of knowing can apply, I argue, to all ‘adult educators’: teachers, therapists, medical doctors and nurses, social workers, human resource managers, etc. (Dominicé, 2007). Auto/biography may be used to bring to light the ‘social contexts in which [professional] learning takes place’ (ibid. p. 248), contexts which are made up of learners’ connections with other people in both public and private spaces across their broader life contexts. My own study confirms that professional learning is inherently social and spans both personal and professional lives.

As I proceeded with my analysis, I felt the need for additional theoretical input on the theme of how market-based societies influence individual relationships with knowing, to help me make sense of the dichotomies that I was observing. I found some answers in recent work by psychoanalysts such as Paul Verhaeghe, who has analysed material from 30 years of clinical work, finding that the neoliberal society promotes competition across all sectors, ‘from science and education to health care and the media’ (Verhaeghe, 2012, p. 113). This causes

social isolation and feelings of inadequacy. People are lonelier than ever before; the pressure to achieve and be happy thus becomes an individual burden, as collective notions of well-being have been deeply undermined. This is a scenario of vulnerability and risk at the professional as well as personal levels (Beck, 2008; 1992). Splitting between knowing and not knowing, self and other, inner and outer, personal and professional, etc. in order to get rid of difficult feelings and thoughts offers a strategy for coping when stress and uncertainty are overwhelming (Frosh, 1991).

Another psychoanalyst, Adam Phillips (2012), wrote about forms of fundamentalism in our daily lives, or what he refers to as wanting to ‘get it’, that is to say, the compulsion to understand and to be understood. This ties in with my thinking about idealizations of knowledge in the professional context: Phillips posits that a division of labour becomes entrenched whereby ‘there is a plenitude – the one who, because he is supposed to know, is in the know – and there is an inadequacy’ (ibid. p. 65). This feeds into what Slavoj Žižek has termed an ‘attitude of overinterpretation’ (ibid) of significant others as specialists, while a ‘phantasy of purity’ (ibid) becomes the currency of self-making, especially in increasingly performative working environments. In such black-and-white framings, reason may be favoured over experience and feeling (Heron, 1992; Belenky *et al.*, 1986), or in some cases the other way around, as Vanessa’s case demonstrates. As my analysis implies, professionals are conditioned by dichotomies, no matter how emancipated they claim to be, as in the case of Beatrice’s and Dilbert’s struggles with the choice between emulating dominant work practices or subverting them. The reflexive context offered by the research not only allowed these dichotomies to be expressed, but also facilitated a partial shift towards better integration.

Follow-up conversations with three participants<sup>149</sup> confirmed that they experienced the pressure to perform and be accountable as marginalizing other personal resources that are equally important for their professions. They reported that participating in the research had offered them a place in which they could engage in creative work without having to know, that is to say, without feeling obliged to pursue functionalist goals. This, and their conversations with the group, enhanced their trust in personal intuition and opened up multiple new routes towards meaning-making. Interestingly, during our collaborative assessment sessions, the young researcher Federico suggested that I should explore how exactly aesthetic work impacts on the mind, whilst Beatrice and Dilbert were more interested in imagining new subversive practices to introduce into their constrained work settings.

These results suggest the need for further investigation into the effects that the pressure to function may have on professionals, and whether it may not weigh more heavily on those who

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<sup>149</sup> See *supra* p. 242.

are still at the early stages of their vocational training (Bainbridge, 2015). It follows that insights from this research may be used to enrich training or to offer specific spaces for reflexivity, as I shall later argue.

### **Uncertainty as a method**

Throughout this research, I have adopted an epistemology of uncertainty (Maturana, 1990; Bocchi and Ceruti, 1985), using strategies of displacement to bring imbalance into a fixed narrative or situation, in order to let another perspective emerge (Fabbri and Munari, 1990). In the Introduction, I described my own desire for transformation, which was driven by a sense of frustration with not knowing and an annoying feeling of ‘vagueness’ in relation to knowledge and to my professional and personal self. Experiencing the challenges of the co-operative methodology made me aware of its perennially provisional character, helping me to see that reflexive interaction and negotiation with others and with the self both foster and maintain an enquiring state of mind. This, and my exploration of my family’s learning biographies, gave me some hope that I was not alone in struggling for greater integrity and integration in my knowing and becoming.

These encounters encouraged me to keep on keeping on and to dare adopt an auto/biographical (Merrill and West, 2009), personal, and increasingly creative style of data analysis. By tentatively exploring creative methods of ‘writing as inquiry’ (Richardson, 1997), at one point it became clear to me that my initial reliance on Charlot’s (1997) and Girard’s (1961) thinking, about complex and mimetic desires in relating to knowledge and in constructing one’s professional identity, needed to be integrated by a feminist perspective. This brought to my ongoing theorization the insight that creative work emerges from the interplay between self *and* other, and subjective *and* objective sources of knowledge (Belenky *et al.*, 1986), and is therefore an inherently uncertain undertaking. Uncertainty, then, if used as a method, subverts, and recomposes the split between mainstream knowledge – privileged, intellectual, and rational – and marginalized knowledge – imaginative, relational, embodied –, a split, as I argued in Chapter Eight, that sets the standards for socially desirable professional identification. Drawing on feminist readings of language and performative texts helped me, at that stage in my analysis, to make sense of what I was reading, and more specifically of the struggles and strategies required to get rid of internalized social schemes reproducing expected relationships to knowing and professional identity.

Yet, dealing with the experience of doubt and unbalance has proved difficult, for me, at many levels. It has required trusting in the ‘scientific’ value of non-traditional material and analysis within the academic context, and thus believing that it might be possible for me to adopt an epistemological and ethical stance of my own, based on encounter, interpretation and

reporting as processes that can, and need to be, explicitly subjectively reflected upon.<sup>150</sup> As my enquiry draws to a (provisional) close, I have come to understand ‘authenticity’ as attempting to reconcile self-construction, epistemology and methodology within my own embodied experience as part of the ongoing process of becoming a professional researcher. This is how I interpret R.M. Rilke’s poetical call to ‘*live* the questions for now’ (Rilke, 1929, p. 17).

As a professional researcher, a more authentic relationship with knowing (Munari, 1993) embraces multiple dimensions: emotions, imaginations, self-images, desires, and my view of significant others, intertwined with concepts, values, and actions. It also entails awareness of the imperfections of practice, and of the time and care needed to make some degree of sense of experience. For these reasons, my report is constitutively unfinished and, I suggest, this is not a lack, but an opening: uncertainty as a strategy of knowing can encourage creativity by inviting subjects to linger in spaces where not knowing is accepted, and even welcomed, thus leading to the forming of more new connections among fragments, and to bringing new stories into the world (Merrill and West, 2009).

I now turn to reflect on what, in my methodology, worked and how, with a view to offering ‘workable paths in muddy waters’. I have extrapolated four main features, or tenets of my methodological approach (aesthetic reflexivity, writing as inquiry, good enough spaces, and cultural objects) also outlining how they may dynamically unfold within an enquiry process.

### **Aesthetic reflexivity**

The first tenet of my methodology is that critically thinking about one’s relationship with knowledge requires aesthetically engaging with it – a relational, perceptual, intuitive and imaginative process.

Throughout this thesis, I have reported on my use of biographically oriented co-operative inquiry (Formenti, 2008; Heron, 1996) and auto/biography (Merrill and West, 2009; Miller, 2007; Stanley, 1992) and investigated the role of aesthetic reflexivity in the development of a professional identity in education. In professional development, reflexivity is understood as the ability to recognize our active role in knowledge building and ‘to factor this knowledge into how professional decisions are made and acted upon’ (Fook and Gardner, 2013, p. 3). Yet this might be perceived as overly straightforward and rationalistic – in other words, as too similar to critical reflection –, and ultimately as ‘a form of “policing” ourselves to fit with the norms of prevailing academic [or professional] orthodoxies’ (Merrill and West, 2009, p. 182). By the term reflexivity, then, I mean something that, differently from reflection, ‘allows ample margin for the unconscious, mystery, and wisdom’ (Formenti, 2016, p. 157, my translation).

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<sup>150</sup> See supra p. 240.

Drawing on psychoanalysis, literary theory and neurology, Celia Hunt (Hunt, 2013; Hunt and Sampson, 2006) has written extensively about reflexivity in the context of creative writing. She argues that ‘when we reflect on something, we think about things that are in the main readily available to us’ (Hunt and Sampson, 2006, p. 4) and ‘reflection does not necessitate a change in the person reflecting [...] nor does it necessarily involve engagement with another person’ (ibid): in contrast, reflexivity is an intrinsically relational process. As Hunt beautifully phrases it:

[Reflexivity] involves creating an internal space, distancing ourselves from ourselves, as it were, so that we are both “inside” and “outside” ourselves simultaneously and able to switch back and forth fluidly and playfully from one position to the other, giving ourselves up to the experience of “self as other” whilst also retaining a grounding in our familiar sense of self. (ibid)

This process of ‘*doubling the self*’ (ibid) demands that the enquirer/learner be flexible enough to relinquish control over a sense of self that seems fixed, and to engage in a struggle with internalized ‘authoritative discourses’ (ibid. p. 27) of others, generating what Bakhtin has conceptualized as the inner ‘multivoicedness’ (ibid. p. 7) that prompts a person to entertain different ideas and think creatively. Recently, Hunt (2013) has come to develop an understanding of reflexivity that does not exclude reflection, but rather goes beyond it, integrating both more receptive and more intentional modes of attention. Combining Heron’s (1992) scheme of the interplay of multiple forms of knowledge with Damasio’s (2000) theory of consciousness, language and the self, Hunt (2013) claims that the reflexive process brings together pre-reflective bodily self-awareness, embodied-experiential learning, *and* critical reflection. Without going into further detail, the valuable insight for me here is that reflexivity entails ‘an increased sense of agency and trust in bodily processes for learning and being and increased ability to think creatively and independently’ (ibid. p. 143).

Reflexivity also relies on aesthetic appreciation: personally, I have drawn on Bateson’s ‘abduction’ (1972) and Heron’s ‘presentational knowing’ (1996) to think of aesthetic knowledge as the capacity to experience patterns through intuition and imagery. For Heron (ibid), aesthetic knowing is encouraged by re-presenting experience in metaphoric and artistic forms. During the enquiry process, I used drawing as a viable strategy for fostering such aesthetic reflexivity. I found that playing with multiple forms of knowledge – sensorial/affective, imaginal, conceptual, and practical – led professionals to experience emergent patterns connecting the (apparent?) fragments of their experience, or identity, thereby helping them to acquire a greater sense of unity and wholeness, and enabling them to express themselves more creatively.



I agree with Nicole Mosconi (1996) that self-integration takes place via multiple ways of knowing, by representing different ‘transitional objects’ (*both* inner and outer, me and not me), and mediating our becoming *with* the world, by offering different ways of self-making, some of which are more valued in our society than others, as long since pointed out by Laing (1967). In the course of the inquiry process, my participants recomposed what Heron defined a “systemic” authenticity [that] takes care of the subject-object split’ (Heron, 1992, p. 80) and the consummate professional habit of being in one’s head. Multiplying ways of knowing generates embodied and performative reflexivity and can have transformative effects.

### **Writing as inquiry**

The second tenet of my methodological approach is that narrating by writing about our lives, both professional and personal, leads to fresh insights by *presenting* what we have learnt, that is to say, by bringing it back to life in the here and now.

Laurel Richardson (1997) has shown through her work that changing our form of representation by re-writing the material of our lives can, to an extent, help us re-edit ourselves. Knowledge is re-experienced with all its imaginal potential and affective resonance which transcend rational systematizations, and this generates a more complex relationship with our knowing, challenging previously static perspectives. I embraced writing as a practice with the power to engender ‘serious thinking’ and ‘emotional labour’ (West, 2016b, p. 119), not least by translating experience from one form of representation to another. At each representation, we may encounter a different take on reality and a new object of perception and thought, and this is likely to elicit displacement (Fabbri and Formenti, 1991) and novel thinking.

This research method goes beyond autobiographic writing, because it acknowledges the limits of words, and self-knowledge, and yet works with them, through the shapes and rhythms of poetry and fiction, in the hopes of gaining, in the words of Virginia Woolf, an intuition of something ‘behind the cotton wool’ of daily life (1985, p. 72). My dissertation has thus relied heavily on metaphorical forms of understanding, problematizing the use of verbal language and underlying its embeddedness in specific contexts of human co-ordination of actions and meanings. Autobiographical and creative writing, drawing, *assemblage*, and theatre enabled the practitioners in my study to tell – and question – ‘good stories’, or inclusive and reflexive narratives (Merrill and West, 2009, p. 113) that tapped into the unconscious. My analysis of my own and the participants’ material, which was strikingly rich and ‘integrated’ in nature (Heron, 1992), uncovered the clash of desire and fear along the path of the knower, also providing a framework for connecting multiple, more and less rational, aspects of knowing. In the con-text – i.e. the shape of the text chosen to present my argument –, I have aimed to show that ‘writing as inquiry’ (Richardson, 1997) can offer a method for *presenting* what has been

learnt, or bringing it to life in the present, rather than merely referring back to, or reporting on, it. Re-presenting knowledge through creative writing has contributed other kinds of knowledge – sensuous, affective, imaginal – to complement my participants’ and my own intellectual reasoning. I would like to believe that it has also engaged the reader via expressive languages including prose, poetry, photography and drawing, thereby both showing and performing – through its content *and* form – my theory about the conditions for learning.

### **Good enough spaces**

The third tenet in my method is that thinking psychoanalytically about the quality of the potential space of enquiry or education helps researchers and educators to be sensitive to the negotiations that are taking place, among all those involved in a learning/enquiry process, about who they are, and how they imagine and do things.

For this space to be ‘good enough’ (Winnicott, 1971) for learning *as* becoming, we need, according to Linden West:

The ability to play, learn and experiment, spontaneously and unselfconsciously, as an adult as well as a child, requires a primitive belief that one will not fall apart or be ridiculed and abused in the process. People need to feel secure and valued, that they have a real self with which to “let go”. (West, 1996, p. 211)

Object relations theories have provided a framework for viewing subjectivity as ‘a never complete product of relationships with actual people and diverse objects, including the symbolic’ (Merrill and West, 2009, p. 70). When space is ‘good enough’, ‘the individual [is capable of] liv[ing] in an area that is intermediate between the dream and the reality, that which is called the cultural life’ (Winnicott, 1965, p. 150). It is in this transitional area that the play with objects takes place, and our relationships with knowing develop, as well as our professional imaginations.

Winnicott defined his notion of ‘space of play’ as

This intermediate area of experience unchallenged in respect to its belonging to inner or external (shared) reality [...] retained in the intense experiencing that belongs to the arts and to religion and to imaginative living, and to creative scientific work. (Winnicott, 1971, p. 19)

This definition helped me to enrich my understanding of Heron’s (1992) concepts of different ways of knowing and whole persons, and Winnicott’s (1965) theorization of self-integration. In short, a transformative space may be viewed as an aesthetic space of experience, which

consists of engaging with objects that are both actual and intellectual, inner and outer, human and non-human, cultural and natural, conscious and unconscious. In implementing my research, however, I had to learn not to idealize this playfulness, but to seek it with an open mind; this also means acknowledging the ambiguities of play, which can even be destructive (Green, 2005). Ambiguities are necessary, however, for ‘playing’ to take place. When everything is clear and defined, there is no need, or desire, to play.

This need for ambiguity became evident during the co-operative inquiry, inviting me to revisit idealistic notions that cooperative research is by definition an inclusive critical learning setting, an issue that had been flagged to me by Belenky and Stanton (2000). Multiplicity was key to encouraging greater inclusivity (in the sense of a greater number of contributions from different people) in play.

It should be noted that the study generated multiple transitional spaces, yet I came to recognize this,<sup>151</sup> and how I had benefited from enjoying greater flexibility in terms of time and place, thanks to the writing process, which participants did not have. This invites us to take a more realistic view of co-operative research, as an emergent endeavour among different people with unique capacities and stories, and in a specific context. The researcher who triggers a cooperative inquiry process may well have greater resources than participants for dealing with the complexities of experience – as well as coming under greater pressure to produce academic knowledge (Treleaven, 1994). As Dilbert told me in the course of our collaborative assessment session,<sup>152</sup> the methodology, as I had implemented it, lacked ad hoc reflexive spaces in which people could link their actions and experience with possible interpretations or reflect on how these interpretations might be relevant to their professional work contexts.

The collaborative assessment that I proposed to the case-study participants, drawing inspiration partly from auto/biographical research (Merrill and West, 2009) and partly from Etherington (2004), consisted in having a one-to-one conversation and producing a collaborative piece of writing (Speedy, 2008). It offered a further transitional space between participant and researcher in which the academic report was critically analysed and reflected upon together. In this conversation, affective as well as cognitive processing of the written report were both attributed value, by both the participant and the researcher. This setting enabled further testing of my interpretations on a more egalitarian basis, given that aspects of my own auto/biographical story were made available to the other participants, along with my overall doctoral research work and tentative theorizations. Such reflexive spaces may be of use, I would suggest, whenever earlier shared assessment of a co-operative research report was not possible to carry out for any reason.

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<sup>151</sup> See paragraph ‘*Facilitation: the participants are free yet are told what to do*’, supra p. 240.

<sup>152</sup> See supra pp. 244-245.

## Cultural objects

The fourth tenet is the use of cultural references, such as literary texts, or films, a specific methodological contribution of this study. These cultural objects were used to elicit free associations about lived experience and to trigger reflexive thinking.

This, I explained in Chapter Nine, directly connects with Winnicott's playfulness (1971) in processes of self-integration and expression of different aspects of the self, and how we may become creative knowers who 'use [our] whole personality' (ibid. p. 73) in playing with a variety of objects: persons, things, ideas, etc.

I have coined the expression 'cultural objects' to refer in my thesis to transitional objects that are both created and found in cultural heritage, as Nicole Mosconi (1996) has pointed out. These objects, such as a film, a painting, a poem, or a novel, are works of art. Gregory Bateson asked 'what important psychic information is in the art object quite apart from what it may "represent"' (1972, p. 130); he was interested in art as 'part of man's quest for grace' (ibid. p. 129), which is the 'problem of integration [of] diverse parts of the mind [...] called "consciousness" and [...] the "unconscious"' (ibid). In other words, artworks are ambiguous, as they may be interpreted in contrasting ways and at many levels, revealing that opposite poles are mutually dependent. This makes them beautiful, because they communicate the possibility of integration through 'the message material' (ibid. p. 140).

I note that cultural artefacts are material objects that we think through. The materiality of our engagement with cultural objects may be theorized using Christopher Bollas's (2009) ideas about how we think 'evocatively' through actual objects of the everyday life. By this he means that a cultural object, physically encountered and historically, linguistically, geographically, socially, and materially embedded, 'speaks' to the unconscious. Cultural objects can work as 'evocative' mediators in research with professionals: 'each object provides "textures of self-experience"' (Bollas, 2009, p. 87). To this end, we may avail in principle of any cultural object with the power to challenge taken-for-granted separations.<sup>153</sup>

In practice, when the choice is made by the researcher/educator, it is not neutral and raises epistemological questions as to how knowledge is constructed and ethical dilemmas in the sense that different cultural objects will be experienced differently by different people depending on, for example their language preferences, or biases based on gender, age, class. Some objects can reproduce power via linguistic structures, while others may more readily trigger critical discussion, as occurred in my study with both the Bicocca and Canterbury groups. For example, the film by Yaron Zilberman's (2012) *A Late Quartet* provoked critical and reflexive comments among participants in Bicocca, bringing up the issue of shades of

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<sup>153</sup> Others have argued for only using objects of recognised artistic status (Kokkos, 2010).

desire in educational work that I had not addressed: erotic desire according to Beatrice,<sup>154</sup> manipulative according to Federico.<sup>155</sup>

Finally, my claim throughout this thesis has been that cultural objects may be approached reflexively and imaginatively via forms of aesthetic engagement (writing, drawing, moving, etc.), thereby activating an ‘imaginal mode’ of the psyche (Heron, 1992). Federico termed this dimension of knowledge the ‘sensory’ nature of experience (see Chapter Five), which I take to mean that an (inter-)subjectively produced representation ‘carr[ies] the *weight* of the real’ (Bollas, 2009, *ibid.* p. 84, my italics) into our knowing. The advantage of this approach is that even socially valued cultural productions have the power to elicit emotional engagement, rather than being viewed purely in the abstract. This in turn encourages greater playfulness between insiders and outsiders (with respect to the professional/research context), and ‘experts’ and non-experts (in the hierarchy of knowledge relations), as well as within the self (Winnicott, 1971; 1965).

In my view, subjective-reflexive and objective-critical reflection (Hunt, 2013) are intertwined in this use of cultural objects, because an external point of reference (present in the culture) and persons’ subjective knowing are brought into dialogue with one another. Critical reflection in education, health and social care contexts, understood as ‘the unsettling and examination of hidden assumptions in order to rework ideas and professional actions’ (Fook and Gardner, 2007, p. 21), needs be complemented with a less intentional approach that is more receptive of the unconscious, ‘illuminating the workings of power and hegemony no less, in the stories that we tell’ (West, 2016b, p. 119). An evocative use of cultural objects is particularly suited to investigating professionals’ relationship with knowing beyond idealizations, as it brings forth more ‘connected knowing’ (Belenky and Stanton, 2000) and more inclusive learning spaces.

### **Outlining a five-step model of spiralling**

Another outcome of my analysis has been the identification of an individual/collective path of becoming, running through the entire workshop experience and beyond. I have identified a complex and non-linear way of becoming – expressed by the metaphor of ‘spiralling’ towards more integration – defining it as a process in which ‘the person is progressively actualized, through different states, some of which can run concurrently’ (Heron, 1992, p. 36). Spiralling by composing different forms of knowing, while also moving auto/biographically between my own and other professional stories, allowed me to recognize idealizations of ‘experts’ and intellectual knowledge. I also began to gradually get in touch with my burning desire to know and my corresponding fears of becoming a professional and a creative knower. Similar

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<sup>154</sup> See supra p. 143.

<sup>155</sup> See supra p. 144.

processes took place for my participants, as I have shown by analysing four individual cases in Chapters Six and Eight.

Spiralling may also be seen as an iterative process of learning and becoming through steps of chaos and order, on the part of a group and/or a researcher/subject implementing the methodological approach of Heron (1996; 1992). My analysis shows that the co-operative research processes in the two groups (see Chapters Five and Seven) brought about becoming through spiralling. Hence, in the group, a model of spiralling towards the construction of a ‘collective mind’ may be conceptualized as flowing through five steps, which I have named as:

- chaos → *déplacement* displacement from previously held premises
- positioning → ‘who am I’ in the research space
- individuation → in relation to knowing and to what I already know
- complex desires → emergence of the unconscious dimension in knowing
- ‘playing’ → living the quest in action

I also recognized a similar sequence in my own process of becoming (see Chapter Ten), at an individual level of spiralling:

- tasting difference → chaos
- entering the spiral → positioning
- exploring the potential space → individuation
- developing more intimate relationships → complex desires
- repositioning inside the group mind → ‘playing’

Thus, my qualitative evidence and analysis show that the subjective and collective may be drawn together within the dispositive of auto/biographically oriented co-operative inquiry (Formenti, 2008; Heron, 1996). However, I do not understand the steps listed above as representing a linear progression: rather, they express the fact that learning is social and individual, recursive and multi-layered. Participants and groups need time to learn new ways of processing information, and they may learn this more significantly and effectively by engaging in interaction: that is, by observing, listening, and positioning themselves in relation to others’ stories and actions. This might resonate with Bandura’s social learning theory, based on the imitation of behaviour or language (Grusec, 1992), and with languaging as coordination of actions and distinctions, to use a more constructivist terminology (Maturana, 1990). My own understanding is that these ‘steps’ entail active negotiation, inter-action, and back and forth processes, such that subjects may easily skip a step or get stuck on one.<sup>156</sup>

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<sup>156</sup> For a review of group learning theories and different models of the sequential phases characterizing the co-operative process, see Wicks and Reason (2009).

My five-step model of spiralling, then, is not proposed as an exhaustive explanatory or design tool, but as a map providing a sense of the learner's unstable progression from encountering an uncomfortable unexpected situation towards devising strategies to cope with it, provoking outcomes that feed back into and modify the original situation, while gradually attaining deeper reflexivity and discovering new possible stories, in resonance with the stories of others. I have written about the ethical dilemmas I encountered during the enquiry process as a result of exposing myself and others to the risks of an increasingly reciprocal and close relationship of care and shared learning, and the feeling of 'embarrassment' (Sclavi, 2003) associated with my dual status as facilitator and learner – an unstable positioning that I consciously adopted by choosing to engage with the enquiry process from the inside rather than the outside, with generative effects. The negotiation of power is also represented on this map, especially at the positioning phase, although this step – like the others – is ongoing rather than achieved once and for all, thus favouring 'authentic collaboration' (Heron and Reason, 2006, p. 150).

These findings may be brought to bear on other educational theories and methodologies, and even on practices beyond the field of education: they have salience to the fields of transformative learning and socio-material approaches,<sup>157</sup> but also to academic development (Jarvis, 2015; Loads, 2010), and critical creativity approaches in nursing and healthcare (Titchen and McCormack, 2010). Early years professionals working with very young children stand to particularly benefit (David, Gooch, and Powell, 2016; Gooch and Powell, 2013) from a multi-modal, multi-sensory approach helping them to develop a more perceptive and imaginative practice. In sum, learning from our professional and personal lives, with the aid of cultural objects and multiple expressive languages, may be viewed as fostering our professional 'attunement and response to the sociomaterial relations in which [we] are embedded' (Fenwick, 2016, p. 17). The alternative reflexive approach to material experience, embodied memories, and personal/collective theories, proposed here can further sustain this process. It can also help researchers, who set out to learn from their own lives (Dominicé, 2000), to draw together the personal and the professional, the subjective and the objective, and so on, given that all such dilemmas, when approached using a spiralling method, become more manageable and easier to provisionally compose.

### **What I have learnt from doing the research**

A story may best illustrate how my relationship with knowing has changed in the course of this research.

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<sup>157</sup> See supra pp. 216-218.

*In April 2016, I spent many nights lying in my bed in the attic of a 19<sup>th</sup> century Tudor cottage, under a steeply pitched roof, reading the 1925-1930 diaries of Virginia Woolf in the Italian translation by Bianca Tarozzi. I left to the translator the artistic task of bringing me the author's original voice. Sometimes I burst out laughing, at other times finding myself captivated by a single word, which I would savour like bittersweet chocolate, never reading more than a few pages at a time. Perhaps I was beginning to take pleasure in my mother tongue without feeling constrained by it. I found a comment I had written in the margin of the book: 'Virginia is a very likeable woman', as if I had actually met her.*

I was most struck by her way of understanding writing, which was her passion and profession. Her path was not easy and smooth, but rather she struggled for weeks, months and years. She felt shipwrecked at times and could not think of what to say. *The Waves* tormented her, and she felt that she had written pages of nonsense, compromises, and missed targets, before finding an inspiration to guide her beyond appearances towards a transcendent whole. I am convinced that humour was her strategy for keeping on keeping on. Her personal struggles with knowing came as a relief to me. Since reading her diaries, I have increasingly begun to see finished cultural objects and writings of great value and beauty as one happy moment in which the 'wholeness' of an unfolding self is expressed. In such moments, the uncertainty and pain of knowing are transcended and 'a steel ring of clear poetry' (Woolf, 1931, p. 75) produced, providing access to some hidden order of things.

Why do I tell this story? It resonates with the ambiguity in my epistemology, in relation to the value of epiphanies, which contrasts with my stated belief in provisional balance (Maturana, 1990) and displacement. Woolf's *Moments of being* (1931) are more in tune with the later academic journeying of the Chilean neurobiologist Francisco Varela, who throughout the 1990s increasingly engaged with Eastern ways of knowing. In attempting to position myself epistemologically, I repeatedly find myself at a crossroads, and cannot see how to hold together the different aspects of my knowing and being. In this ambiguity, I sense the possibility to reconnect with my travels in South East Asia and to make peace, and work, with the reflexive doubling of the self that arises from sojourning in different countries and cultures. Encountering Woolf's words set me on my way, sparking the desire to read more women writers and find out about their lives, do more dance, and participate in feminist research and civic engagement initiatives. I do not know whether my enquiry has led me to develop a sense of intuition on a par with Woolf's, but I do believe that I have learnt to stand 'on the edge' of changes to come, hiding less and more fully enjoying the complexity of 'playing' with knowing.





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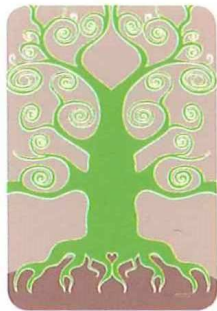
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Appendix n. 1:  
 Fabbri, D. and Munari, A., 2010, *Metaphors of knowledge*

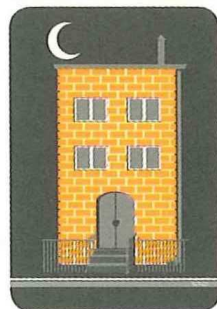
Metafore della Conoscenza / Metaphors of Knowledge



Albero  
 Tree



Caverna  
 Cave



Edificio  
 Building



Enciclopedia  
 Encyclopedia

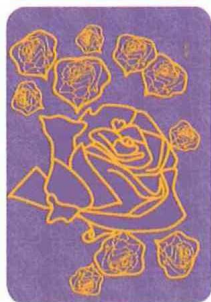
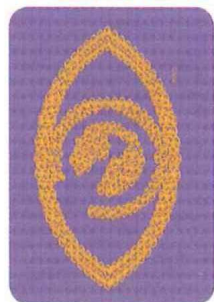


Labirinto  
 Labyrinth

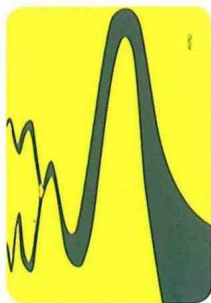
Metafore della Conoscenza / Metaphors of Knowledge



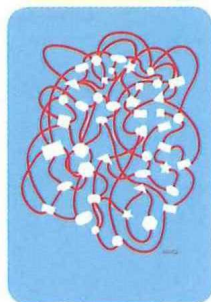
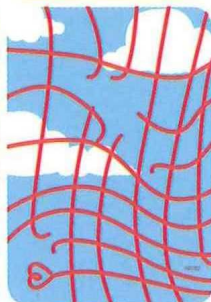
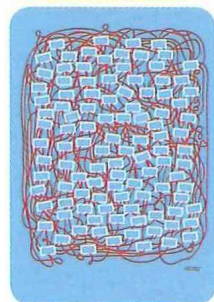
Oceano  
Ocean



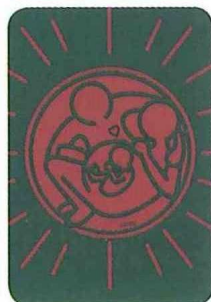
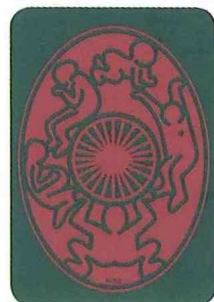
Ologramma  
Hologram



Percorso  
Path



Reticolo  
Network



Ruota della Vita  
Wheel of life

## Cosa sono i LEO® e cos'è l'Epistemologia Operativa?

Il LEO® (Laboratorio di Epistemologia Operativa) è nato agli inizi degli anni '80 da un'idea di Donata Fabbri e Alberto Munari. Figlio diretto della Psicologia Culturale, il LEO® si situa in quella tradizione psicologica ed epistemologica nota sotto il nome di *costruttivismo*, che considera la conoscenza come la risultante di un processo di costruzione simultanea tra il soggetto conoscente e il contesto che l'accoglie.

L'Epistemologia Operativa è una strategia di intervento formativo il cui obiettivo principale è la presa di coscienza, attraverso la sperimentazione attiva, dei processi di elaborazione della conoscenza e del rapporto che si stabilisce con essi. Costruiti ogni volta "su misura", in funzione del contesto e della domanda istituzionale, delle conoscenze da elaborare e del pubblico al quale si rivolge, i Laboratori di Epistemologia Operativa riuniscono un certo numero di piccoli gruppi di adulti attorno a delle attività concrete, specialmente ideate e confezionate per indagare diverse problematiche.

Strumento formativo di grande efficacia, utilizzato da quasi 30 anni in svariati contesti istituzionali e organizzativi, "LEO – Laboratorio di Epistemologia Operativa"® è un marchio registrato e solo i diplomati del *Master in Mercologia LEO®* possono usare questo appellativo.

## Chisiamo?

### Autori

**Donata Fabbri** Psicologa ed epistemologa, direttrice del CIPC (Centre International de Psychologie Culturelle) di Ginevra, già professore, dagli anni '80, di Psicologia dell'educazione all'Università di Ginevra. Con A. Munari ha messo a punto, da più di trent'anni, una metodologia di formazione nota sotto il nome di LEO, *Laboratorio di Epistemologia Operativa*. Organizza e partecipa a diversi programmi di formazione e di ricerca in Italia e all'estero. Tra le sue più recenti pubblicazioni ricordiamo: *La memoria della regina*, 2004;

*La dimensione parallela* (con P. d'Alfonso), 2003; *Strategie del sapere. Verso una psicologia culturale* (con A. Munari), 2005.

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**Alberto Munari** Psicologo ed epistemologo, Alberto Munari è professore di Epistemologia Operativa dell'Apprendimento Adulto presso l'Università di Padova, dopo aver diretto, per più di 30 anni, l'Unità di Psicologia e Ricerse Umane dell'Università di Ginevra. Con D. Fabbri ha fondato, agli inizi degli anni '80, la Psicologia Culturale e l'Epistemologia Operativa, dalle quali hanno preso forma i Laboratori di formazione LEO, oggi usati in diversi programmi di valorizzazione delle risorse umane nelle imprese e nelle organizzazioni pubbliche e private. Tra le sue pubblicazioni: *Il sapere ritrovato*, 1993; *Strategie del sapere. Verso una psicologia culturale* (con D. Fabbri), 2005.

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**Mauro Strada** Illustratore e pubblicitario; ha cominciato da subito a lavorare come freelancer in campo pubblicitario ed editoriale. Nel 2005 crea lo Studio MS Design specializzato in creatività e immagini per editoria e aziende.

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Ringraziamo il Dott. Giuseppe Marcuccio per gli utili commenti sulle attività nell'impresa.

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## Why Metaphors of Knowledge?

**Tree**  
*Operative epistemology*: the action-based study of knowledge (see footnote at the end), which we created in the early 1980s, uses metaphors in its LEO® laboratories as a privileged instrument of research and training. For some time now metaphor has been taken as an important cognitive tool and not just a figure of speech or simple poetic ornamentation. Right from our childhood we learn to give order to what we learn, setting it out according to *metaphorical images* passed down through our culture and history. As an example, the metaphor of the *tree*, shared by all cultures, organising knowledge in terms of its roots, trunk and branches, suggests the idea the development of knowledge is a slow but relentless process of growth leading to a gradual differentiation into separate realms of understanding; on the other hand, the metaphor of the *building*, also found in many cultures, encourages us to assume that there must be "simple units" of knowledge, which, like the bricks used to construct a building, are piled on top of each other to define knowledge. And there are lots of other fascinating metaphors to be discovered in the history of science and culture. We have created a repertoire of ten: well aware that this list is far from complete, they seemed to us (based on our experience as teachers and educators) as those most frequently used in cognition.

## Cave

## Building

## Encyclopedia

## Labyrinth

## Ocean

## Hologram

## Path

## Network

## Wheel of life

## Relational and educational aims

Right from when we are children we choose and decide our own way of metaphorically organising what we know, learn and study, even without being aware of it.

Some people use detailed schemes, some elaborate short summaries of what they have studied, some compile all kinds of charts which they then combine together, some sketch mental maps and yet others are... "all at sea", jumping from one subject to another, exploring without any definite goals.

As young children we all preferred to study with a boy or girl friend, who either had the same way of studying as us or a way which we felt complementary to our own, and even at work we immediately feel close to certain people or quite

detached from others... We usually think it is a question of personality but more often than not these are cognitive issues.

We are now finally realising in the psycho-educational and training fields that our ways of organising knowledge, adopting various different metaphors, are fundamental not only for understanding the world but also in our relationships with others!

So in every single context, from the family to our place of study and work, numerous metaphors are always present: every single person has their own, more often than not without realising it, and every relationship we construct also involves an attempt to make our own cognitive metaphors communicate with those of others: so every relationship is also a dialogue or a sort of silent clash of metaphors.

We have all experienced

the pleasure of telling somebody you think like me or you think in a different but complementary way to me!

Yes indeed, because synergies, winning combinations between ways of thinking and metaphors of knowledge, can be very interesting and constructive, but if the metaphors encountered are too contrasting they can actually impede each other and make our processes of learning and relationships more difficult rather than easier.

Being able to recognise metaphors of knowledge, understanding their relational, developmental and educational implications, learning how to use them in a mindful way, can help us organise what we know more effectively and make our processes of learning and communication easier at any age and in any context.

## Why a game of cards about Metaphors of Knowledge?

Nobody ever taught us how to understand and interpret our metaphors of knowledge, those we use on an everyday basis: very often we are not even aware of them and we miss out on plenty of extra opportunities in our relations with ourselves and others!

So how can we find out what our metaphors of knowledge are and what characteristics and traits they have? What can we do so that we finally really understand our "privileged" approaches to knowledge?

At the LEO® laboratories we have developed various ideas on these matters based on the experience we have gained through many years of training in different contexts, eventually developing this game of cards, which can help us reveal some of our cognitive traits in an amusing and pleasant way!

The game involves 30 cards plus 2 other summary and naming cards, which will be required by the person proposing the game, in order to immediately recognise the cards: so each of the 10 metaphors is represented (in terms of some of its various cognitive nuances) by three cards designed in the same colours. Various activities are possible using this material, in different contexts, some of which we will be outlining below.

But first of all, would not you like to know a little more about metaphors of knowledge?

## The cognitive traits of each Metaphor of Knowledge

Usually, we do not use just one single metaphor to organise our knowledge! Each of us favours one, which we will call the *basic metaphor*, which may coexist with another metaphor, a *complementary metaphor*. These metaphors either support each other or alternate, according to our needs and to the contexts we find ourselves in. During the course of our life, however, we may also alter our basic metaphors due to very important events or unexpected changes, altering our way of thinking and organising knowledge!

Those are the people who tell us: *until a year ago I used to think like that, but now I've changed my mind...*

A big change does not just alter our personality, it also influences our way of thinking and hence our metaphors of knowledge!

So this game may accompany us during our own personal evolution! But now let's look at them one by one...

For each of them you will also find a *key phrase* summing up the cognitive traits of those people who use them frequently.

**Tree** "I like to cultivate ideas, make them grow and organise them"

The image of a tree as a metaphor for knowledge has been (and still is) used to demonstrate that knowledge can be organised around a bearing structure (trunk) with various ramifications (branches) highlighting the connections between the various levels, showing kinships and relations between pieces of knowledge sharing the same roots. This means that understanding and knowledge need to be constructed from the bottom up: there are roots from which knowledge stems, which, if they are entrenched in fertile ground, nourish the tree, its branches and leaves (the various realms of knowledge). This image provides a good idea of how knowledge can be organised and arranged to bear good fruits.

**Building** "I like to build solid bricks to place one on top of the other"

The metaphor of the building is one of the most solid and frequently used within the realm of organising knowledge. Many teachers or educationalists have frequently referred to bricks or blocks, symbolising the various contents of knowledge, both in the past and also in more recent times. The teacher does not just provide the "material" for constructing bricks, but may also provide the building project (or at least part of it) or alternatively help in its creation. In any case, they will aid in the construction of the foundations and their consolidation. We may build either large or small buildings, according to the case in question. The building is constructed in a linear and hierarchical way

and this obviously affects our value judgements about the various fundamental elements composing it (the bricks). This means that some elements will be considered necessarily and fundamentally important and others just accessories and not essential, placed in an order of growing or decreasing importance in relation to the building project itself. This metaphor is reassuring because it provides an image of solidity... but what happens if there is an earthquake?

### Encyclopedia

**"I like to gather and organise as many notions as possible"**

Underscoring the idea of an encyclopedia was the impulse to structure knowledge around organisational schemes or models attempting to set out the whole of human knowledge. Let's not forget that the three grounding principles on which the encyclopedia was first created are: *collect information, set it out clearly, and make it easily accessible to everybody*. So whenever we want to carefully arrange a whole body of knowledge in a simple way, for study or other purposes, we resort to this metaphor. Lots of professions, those which refer to a body of precise and carefully arranged knowledge, are based on it.

**Labyrinth "I like to walk along winding pathways to get to an important destination"**

The labyrinth, described in ancient times as a cave full of tunnels and corridors, has for centuries provided an image for the pathway of an individual's life and, within the realm of religion, a difficult and tortuous road, which may lead to faith amid so many difficulties: the wonderful labyrinth of Charities Cathedral evokes this kind of route. But lots of other labyrinths can be found in various different cultures, from Greek to Indian and from Aztec to Chinese.

This means the labyrinth is a metaphor for our paths of life, knowledge and identity. It is the favoured metaphor of those people who love to tell their own story, or to just rethink their own path through life, placing the significance of the tests they have had to overcome and which have helped them grow at the focus of their interests and their relationships with other people.

**Ocean "I like to set off to discover new and unknown pathways"**

This metaphor, which was extremely successful in philosophy in the past, is now being used frequently once again to describe our way of knowing. Most of us "navigate" through the oceans of the internet on a daily basis! This metaphor allows us to escape from a rigid structure for organising knowledge and encourages us to set off on a voyage of discovery, even at the risk of actually losing ourselves but, at the same time, of encountering openness, freedom and new experiences. It is liked by those people who believe that knowledge is an ongoing adventure and who are at ease with instability and change.

### Hologram "I like to discover that the universal is always present in the particular and vice-versa"

Holograms are peculiar patterns obtained using a laser capable of creating a photographic effect providing a three-dimensional representation of the objects being represented. Every part of the hologram contains the whole information: breaking the hologram into pieces results in each piece still showing the entire object. So everything is contained in each part.

The metaphor of the hologram is a good description of the desire to organise our knowledge, so that we constantly keep in mind what is vitally important for us: values, principles and the ideas in which we firmly believe and which we hope to rediscover intact on other planes and in other contexts. So we can continually rediscover them afresh both in the fine details and broader representations.

**Path "I like to set off on a journey in lots of stages"**

The metaphor of a path can be a useful way of representing our current way of learning involving plenty of digressions and explorations. But it is an ancient metaphor with Greek roots and then, later on, religious and philosophical roots: the more or less straight path to be followed and a pathway as progress, the kind, for instance, associated with the scientific method, with various stages to be followed to obtain results. The pathway as a metaphor is for those who love to search, progress gradually, and learn as they move forward. It is the metaphor of those who like to narrate what they have discovered, and it crops up in biographies and life stories. But the

pathway or course often is not yet marked out and we mark it out as we walk along it, just like in Antonio Machado's wonderful poem: *Wayfarer, there is no path, the path is made while you walk.*

### Network

**"I like to connect many different elements"**  
A network provides a dynamic, non-rigid image for organising knowledge. None of the elements and different pieces of knowledge related together in a network is more important than any other, and it is the coherency of their reciprocal relations which gives meaning to each network. Attention is shifted onto the bonds between the things I learn and have learned, and the people who use this metaphor are capable of connecting together very different elements which may be poles apart from each other. It is a metaphor elastically arranging our knowledge: a network has no bounds! And this favours creativity, curiosity and an experimental spirit.

### Wheel of life

**"I like to understand myself deep down during the various moments in my life"**  
This image is borrowed from Indian-Tibetan culture in which it represents our path on this earth through various stages in life in an attempt to get rid of the psychological and communicational mechanisms imprisoning us. Desire, attachment and ignorance are just some of the shackles which prevent us from living peacefully. Entering into this metaphor and using it describes our desire to try and really understand ourselves during the various stages in life. This is the metaphor which is often used and favoured during periods of major changes or important decisions in life.

## Advantages and disadvantages of the Metaphors of Knowledge

When you have discovered your metaphors of knowledge using the proposed activities, it will be useful to reflect on their potential and the main advantages (indicated by a +) they can offer and their disadvantages (indicated by a -), which can be mitigated by combining them with another metaphor (remember the *basic metaphor* and *complementary metaphor*?). These are not the only traits! They are just a trace to help you discover many others on your own!

### Tree

- + Possibility of ramification (lots of branches for creating order)
- + Possibility of tracing an offshoot from what is arranged on the branches
- The branches do not directly interact with each other
- Constrains the freedom of interaction

### Cave

- + Further analyse and descend deep down inside to "free yourself"
- + Discover unexpected things
- + The value of a personal journey
- Danger of being lost
- Danger of being isolated

### Building

- + Helps with proper planning
- + Creates basic modular elements (bricks)
- Always works from the simple to the complex, from the bottom upwards
- Gathers knowledge on separate planes

### Encyclopedia

- + Allows knowledge to be fully organised
- + Offers a rich and detailed vision
- Danger of notionism
- Danger of mixing together heterogeneous concepts

### Labyrinth

- + Encourages research and exploration
- + Helps overcome difficulties
- Danger of getting lost and retracing the same path
- Danger of giving up and losing sight of the goal

### Ocean

- + Openness, freedom
- + Possibility of trying out different routes
- Danger of being lost and "growing"
- Danger of losing your bearings

### Hologram

- + Knowledge is in constant motion
- + The whole lies in the parts and the parts in the whole
- Danger of too much control
- Everything is over "organised", closed and constructed

### Path

- + Enhances discovery and curiosity
- + Good balance between unpredictability and predictability
- Progress in stages
- Overall vision only obtainable after reaching a destination

### Network

- + Emphasises bonds
- + All the properties are important
- + Importance of relations
- Does not allow a historical approach
- Tends to construct itself endlessly

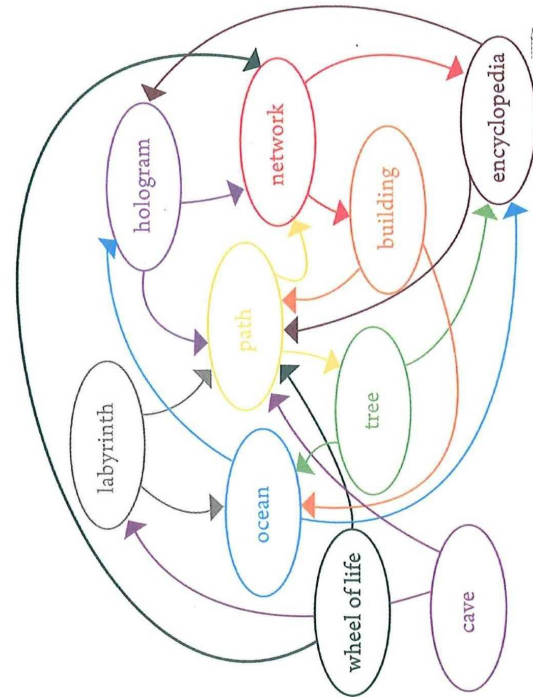
### Wheel of life

- + Importance of knowing oneself
- + Value given to change
- Fatalism (*that is the way it is... that is life... nothing can be done about it*)
- Fear of tests which must inevitably be taken

## Synergies – complementarities

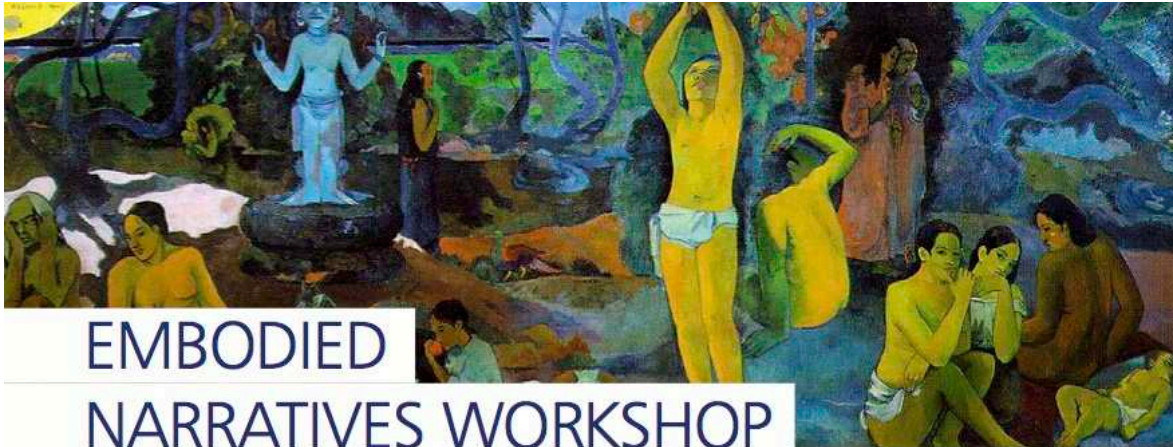
As we have seen, metaphors interact with each other: not just our own personal metaphors, but also our metaphors with those of the people we work and live with. Obviously there are certain metaphors which can clearly be seen to reinforce and support each other, but it is much more likely in everyday life that we find ourselves dealing with metaphors which are very different from our own. And that is when things become interesting: it is when encountering "diversity" that each of us makes our own great conquests, provided we do not close the doors of our heart and mind to those confronting us with their own metaphors different from our own!

Heart and mind (search for the *small heart* which is *more or less hidden away in all the patterns on the cards*), thoughts and emotions, because the magic of metaphor allows this constant union and hence allows us to get to know each other better. The synergies which the design shown below presents are, therefore, based on this union of complementary differences to be sought out and strengthened. They are not the only ones we could have shown you... you can find plenty of others for yourself... How can you do that? By starting with the disadvantages of each metaphor (the - points listed above) and then looking for the characteristics and traits which will improve and complete them in the advantages of the others (the + points)!





Appendix n. 2:  
Flyer of the Embodied Narratives Workshop (English Version)



# EMBODIED NARRATIVES WORKSHOP

THE RELATIONSHIP TO KNOWING, AND THE PROFESSIONAL SELF

JANUARY – JUNE 2015

Provisional dates: 24 January, 21 February, 28 March, 18 April, 16-17 May, 13 June

- Are you a professional working in education and/or the care services?
- Are you interested in understanding your professional practice and the formation of your professional/learning identity?
- Are you keen to explore these issues within a safe, reflective space and by drawing upon the arts?

If so, you can benefit from a FREE series of experiential sessions.

Come and join the Embodied Narratives Workshop, a programme of professional and personal development and research which is run by educational professionals, and offered at our Canterbury campus (CCCU).

**METHODOLOGY:** Cooperative Inquiry, biographic and clinical-reflexive approaches in adult education.

**PARTICIPANTS:** Professionals in education and health care, preferably with 3 years' experience (10 people only)

**STAFF:** G. Del Negro (Phd Student, CCCU) and F. Cappa (Researcher, Milano-Bicocca)

An open presentation will take place during the week beginning 1 December 2014.  
For further information please email: [g.del-negro148@canterbury.ac.uk](mailto:g.del-negro148@canterbury.ac.uk)



The programme comprises 5 full-day workshops and an intensive weekend of collaborative research within a group of 10 fellow-professionals. The programme has been developed as part of a joint international research project between two universities; the University of Milano –Bicocca in Italy and Canterbury Christ Church University in the UK.

By working in collaboration with each other and with the group leaders, you are invited to explore your learning biography:

- What stories about 'learning' helped form our perceptions as we were growing up?
- What relationships were meaningful for our learning development, and why? Which metaphors inform our 'relationships to knowing'?

By addressing these questions, we hope to better understand how our learning frameworks, and our relationships with ourselves, with others and with our lifeworlds have impacted upon our ways of knowing and becoming within our professional roles, and as part of our larger humanity.

Might an investigation of ourselves as learners help shed new light on how we understand and construct our professional lives, and of how we develop a more flexible relationship with our strategies of knowing and becoming? The intensive weekend will be a time to focus on our professional choices and practices through art based practices and role play.

What opportunities might we give ourselves to expand our frames of reference, and how might we utilise these?

We will explore together the borders between what language can utter, and the unsayable by using a multiplicity of views and techniques to illuminate the forms of our collective imagery on our broader educational lives. We will inhabit a 'space of play' where we can become curious about ourselves, allowing for new ideas to emerge through watercolours, collage, the construction of objects, and creative writing.

We will become more attentive to how our bodies 'makes memory', and renovate our language through a spiral of doing, writing and conversing together as a strategy to open up new processes of self-learning.

An individual portfolio will be produced with the materials created during the programme. The portfolio will be a 'dynamic archive' of the narrative traces, representations and symbols that speak of the individual and group thinking about our relationship to knowing, and our professional identities. These same materials will then be analysed as part of doctoral research being undertaken in Milan and Canterbury about adult learning and professional becoming.

A certificate of attendance will be provided at the end of the programme for all participants.

An open presentation will take place during the week beginning 1 December 2014.  
For further information please email: [g.del-negro148@canterbury.ac.uk](mailto:g.del-negro148@canterbury.ac.uk)



**Appendix n. 3:  
Data set**

Table (A): Research subjects' material.

<b>Individual data: record of data produced by individual research subjects.</b>	
<i>Written</i>	Autobiographical texts Imaginative texts Reflexive texts Epistemological texts WAY texts Poetic texts (individually composed, individually composed with the help of another) Clinic-reflexive texts (on film) Reflective reports in between meetings (written by one different participant each time) Emails of reflections on the performative weekend (sent privately to the facilitators) Curriculum vitae (sent privately to the facilitators)
<i>Audio</i>	Recordings of individual reading of one's text Recordings of individual presentation of artworks (drawings, assemblages) Recordings of individual narration on one's learning biography inside the map
<i>Visual</i>	Pictures of individual artworks (drawings, assemblages, mixed technique) Images individually chosen (images of human or natural space) Cards individually chosen (cards of metaphors of knowledge)
<b>Group data: record of data produced in a group.</b>	
<i>Written</i>	Small group script for role play
<i>Audio</i>	Recordings of group conversation (initial conversation, conversation after presenting individual artworks, conversation after reading individual texts, final conversation) Recordings of group conversation on an evocative object (literature text, film) Recording of group work (composition) Small group presentation of a theory
<i>Visual</i>	Pictures of group compositions (of drawings, of mixed technique objects) Pictures of the aesthetic representation of small group theories Videos of small group performance (role-play, mise en scène) Videos of group performance (improvisation, mise en scène with individual artworks) Video of small group presentation of a theory

Table (B): Researcher's material.

<b>Field data: record of researcher's data produced inside of the co-operative research process.</b>	
<i>Written</i>	Field notes (my research diary)
<i>Audio</i>	Conversations with my co-facilitator (conversations to design the workshop, conversations of reflections during breaks of the workshop, conversations of reflections on the workshop, analysis of the materials)
<i>Visual</i>	Field pictures (pictures of the physical space of the setting, of myself, of my co-facilitator, of the group during the work)
<b>Auto/biographical data: record of researcher's data produced outside of the co-operative research process.</b>	
<i>Written</i>	Autobiographical texts Imaginative texts Epistemological texts SWAT texts Poetic texts (individually composed, individually composed with the help of another) Reflexive text on co-facilitation (sent privately to my co-facilitator)
<i>Audio</i>	Auto/biographical interviews (to my parents, to my grandmother) Conversations with my co-facilitator (auto/biographical conversations on the experience of the workshop)
<i>Visual</i>	Auto/biographical pictures (pictures of the setting of my autobiographical sessions, of myself, of my parents) Pictures of my artworks (drawings) Cards individually chosen (cards of metaphors of knowledge chosen by me, chosen by my parents)

Table (C): Co-facilitator's material.

<b>Auto/biographical data: record of co-facilitator's data produced outside of the co-operative research process.</b>	
<i>Written</i>	Reflexive text on co-facilitation (sent privately to me)

## **Appendix n. 4: Participant information sheet and Consent form**

### **(1) Participant Information Sheet**

#### Embodied Narratives Workshop: The relationship to knowing, and the professional Self

A research study is being conducted at Canterbury Christ Church University (CCCU) by Ms Gaia Del Negro. This study is conducted as part of an MPhil/PhD research and is a collaborative project of the CCCU and the University of Milano-Bicocca, in Italy.

#### 1. Background

My study looks at the interface between the personal and the professional in the fields of education, and at how professional ‘knowledges’ and ‘identities’ are developed. I am particularly interested in looking at the fringes between HE and the world(s) of work. My focus is therefore on the dynamic between theories and practices, as it is experienced in the stories of becoming a professional in education.

#### 2. What will you be required to do?

Participants in this study will be required to take part in a cooperative inquiry with other professionals in education. That is, a small group of subjects will meet periodically to participate in narrative workshops where drawings, artworks, poems and stories will be produced and, on a voluntary basis, shared. Works will be autobiographical, i.e. personal accounts of one’s experience. All themes to investigate will be agreed together with the group and the researcher.

In the conclusive phase of the study, volunteers might decide to go through an interview with the researcher to further explore their experience of the study.

After a period of time, volunteers might decide to participate to a follow-up, as a group, to reflect together on their experience of learning through the workshops and in a relationship with their working lives.

#### 3. To participate you must:

- Be either a post-graduate or doctoral student enrolled in CCCU Faculty of Education or in CCCU Faculty of Health and Wellbeing, or a professional currently working in the educational field, in a broad sense.
- Be available to participate in a limited number of workshops (5 full days plus one intensive weekend) to take place periodically from January to June 2015.
- Be curious about your own thinking about becoming a professional and a person in society.
- Be curious and respectful of other people’s thinking and experience.
- Be willing to experiment with writing and aesthetic forms of representation in a playful and non-judgmental atmosphere.
- Be willing to share a part of your artworks and take part in discussions, in respect of your own and others’ participation.

#### 4. Procedures

You will be asked to take part in a series of narrative workshops, as specified above. You can be absent from workshops, but please try to participate if you can. Taking part in the narrative workshops is the minimum requirement for participation in the study.

#### 5. Feedback

You will be informed of an eventual publication of results. Mutual feedback with the researcher can be solicited at any time during the study.

#### 6. Confidentiality and Dissemination of results

All data and personal information will be stored securely within CCCU premises in accordance with the Data Protection Act 1998 and the University’s own data protection requirements. After completion of the study, all data will be made anonymous (i.e. all personal information associated with the data will be removed).

By participating to this study you authorise our use of the materials generated during the days for our research purposes, and you give your consent in the ways specified in the attached Consent Form.

7. Deciding whether to participate

If you have any questions or concerns about the nature, procedures or requirements for participation do not hesitate to contact me. Should you decide to participate, you will be free to withdraw at any time without having to give a reason.

8. Any questions?

Please contact Ms Gaia Del Negro on **gaia.del-negro148@canterbury.ac.uk**, Canterbury Christ Church University, Faculty of Education, Graduate School, **01227 782701**.

## **(2) PhD Research Consent Form**

### Embodied Narratives Workshop: The relationship to knowing, and the professional Self

Your contact details:

Address:

Tel:

Email:

**Please initial box ONLY where you give your consent:**

1.	I confirm that I have read and understand the Participant Information Sheet for the above study and have had the opportunity to ask questions.	
2.	I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving any reason.	
3.	I agree to take part in the above study.	
4.	I authorise the use of the materials generated during the days for research purposes, to be used within the supervision of Ms Gaia Del Negro and the production of her doctorate, and for publication in wider fora.	
5.	I authorise taking audio recordings of my voice during the days for research purposes.	
6.	I authorise the use of audio recordings of my voice taken during the days for research purposes, to be used within the supervision of Ms Gaia Del Negro and the production of her doctorate.	
7.	I authorise the use of audio recordings of my voice taken during the days for research purposes, to be used for publication in wider fora, subject to my specific agreement.	
8.	I authorise taking photographs of the space, which may contain me during the days for research purposes.	
9.	I authorise the use of photographs of the space which may contain me taken during the days for research purposes, to be used within the supervision of Ms Gaia Del Negro and the production of her doctorate.	
10.	I authorise the use of photographs of the space, which may contain me taken during the days for research purposes, to be used for publication in wider fora, subject to my specific agreement.	

Your Name:

Signed:

Date:

Researcher: Gaia Del Negro

## Appendix n. 5:

Borges, J.L., 1964, 'The circular ruins', translated by James E. Irby

### *The Circular Ruins*

magic. He felt the chill of fear and sought out a burial niche in the dilapidated wall and covered himself with some unknown leaves

The purpose which guided him was not impossible, though it was supernatural. He wanted to dream a man: he wanted to dream him with minute integrity and insert him into reality. This magical project had exhausted the entire content of his soul; if someone had asked him his own name or any trait of his previous life, he would not have been able to answer. The uninhabited and broken temple suited him, for it was a minimum of visible world; the nearness of the peasants also suited him, for they would see that his frugal necessities were supplied. The rice and fruit of their tribute were sufficient sustenance for his body, consecrated to the sole task of sleeping and dreaming.

At first, his dreams were chaotic; somewhat later, they were of a dialectical nature. The stranger dreamt that he was in the centre of a circular amphitheatre which in some way was the burned temple: clouds of silent students filled the gradins; the faces of the last ones hung many centuries away and at a cosmic height, but were entirely clear and precise. The man was lecturing to them on anatomy, cosmography, magic; the countenances listened with eagerness and strove to respond with understanding, as if they divined the importance of the examination which would redeem one of them from his state of vain appearance and interpolate him into the world of reality. The man, both in dreams and awake, considered his phantoms' replies, was not deceived by impostors, divined a growing intelligence in certain perplexities. He sought a soul which would merit participation in the universe.

After nine or ten nights, he comprehended with some bitterness that he could expect nothing of those students who passively accepted his doctrines, but that he could of those who, at times, would venture a reasonable contradiction. The former, though worthy of love and affection, could not rise to the state of individuals; the latter pre-existed somewhat more. One afternoon (now his afternoons too were tributaries of

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### *The Circular Ruins*

And if he let off dreaming about you ...

*Through the Looking Glass, VI*

No one saw him disembark in the unanimous night, no one saw the bamboo canoe sinking into the sacred mud, but within a few days no one was unaware that the silent man came from the South and that his home was one of the infinite villages upstream, on the violent mountainside, where the Zend tongue is not contaminated with Greek and where leprosy is infrequent. The truth is that the obscure man kissed the mud, came up the bank without pushing aside (probably without feeling) the brambles which dilacerated his flesh, and dragged himself, nauseous and bloodstained, to the circular enclosure crowned by a stone tiger or horse, which once was the colour of fire and now was that of ashes. This circle was a temple, long ago devoured by fire, which the malarial jungle had profaned and whose god no longer received the homage of men. The stranger stretched out beneath the pedestal. He was awakened by the sun high above. He evidenced without astonishment that this wounds had closed; he shut his pale eyes and slept, not out of bodily weakness but out of determination of will. He knew that this temple was the place required by his invincible purpose; he knew that, downstream, the incessant trees had not managed to choke the ruins of another propitious temple, whose gods were also burned and dead; he knew that his immediate obligation was to sleep. Towards midnight he was awakened by the disconsolate cry of a bird. Prints of bare feet, some figs and a jug told him that men of the region had respectfully spied upon his sleep and were solicitous of his favour or feared his

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### *Labyrinths*

sleep, now he remained awake only for a couple of hours at dawn) he dismissed the vast illusory college for ever and kept one single student. He was a silent boy, fallow, sometimes obstinate, with sharp features which reproduced those of the dreamer. He was not long disconcerted by his companions' sudden elimination; his progress, after a few special lessons, astounded his teacher. Nevertheless, catastrophe ensued. The man emerged from sleep one day as if from a viscous desert, looked at the vain light of afternoon, which at first he confused with that of dawn, and understood that he had not really dreamt. All that night and all day, the intolerable lucidity of insomnia weighed upon him. He tried to explore the jungle, to exhaust himself; amidst the hemlocks, he was scarcely able to manage a few snatches of feeble sleep, fleetingly mottled with some rudimentary visions which were useless. He tried to convoke the college and had scarcely uttered a few brief words of exhortation, when it became deformed and was extinguished. In his almost perpetual sleeplessness, his old eyes burned with tears of anger.

He comprehended that the effort to mould the incoherent and vertiginous matter dreams are made of was the most arduous task a man could undertake, though he might penetrate all enigmas of the upper and lower orders: much more arduous than weaving a rope of sand or coining the faceless wind. He comprehended that an initial failure was inevitable. He swore he would forget the enormous hallucination which had misled him at first, and he sought another method. Before putting it into effect, he dedicated a month to replenishing the powers his delirium had wasted. He abandoned any premeditation of dreaming and, almost at once, was able to sleep for a considerable part of the day. The few times he dreamt during this period, he did not take notice of the dreams. To take up his task again, he waited until the moon's disk was perfect. Then, in the afternoon, he purified himself in the waters of the river, worshipped the planetary gods, uttered the lawful syllables of a powerful name and slept. Almost immediately, he dreamt of a beating heart.

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### *The Circular Ruins*

He dreamt it as active, warm, secret, the size of a closed fist, of garnet colour in the penumbra of a human body as yet without face or sex; with minute love he dreamt it, for fourteen lucid nights. Each night he perceived it with greater clarity. He did not touch it, but limited himself to witnessing it, observing it, perhaps correcting it with his eyes. He perceived it, lived it, from many distances and many angles. On the fourteenth night he touched the pulmonary artery with his finger, and then the whole heart, inside and out. The examination satisfied him. Deliberately, he did not dream for a night; then he took the heart again, invoked the name of a planet and set about to envision another of the principal organs. Within a year he reached the skeleton, the eyelids. The innumerable hair was perhaps the most difficult task. He dreamt a complete man, a youth, but this youth could not rise nor did he speak nor could he open his eyes. Night after night, the man dreamt him as asleep.

In the Gnostic cosmogonies, the demiurgi knead and moulded a red Adam who cannot stand alone; as unskilful and crude and elementary as this Adam of dust was the Adam of dreams fabricated by the magician's nights of effort. One afternoon, the man almost destroyed his work, but then repented. (It would have been better for him had he destroyed it.) Once he had completed his supplications to the numina of the earth and the river, he threw himself down at the feet of the effigy which was perhaps a tiger and perhaps a horse, and implored its unknown succour. That twilight, he dreamt of the statue. He dreamt of it as a living, tremulous thing: it was not an atrocious mongrel of tiger and horse, but both these vehement creatures at once and also a bull, a rose, a tempest. This multiple god revealed to him that its earthly name was Fire, that in the circular temple (and in others of its kind) people had rendered it sacrifices and cult and that it would magically give life to the sleeping phantom, in such a way that all creatures except Fire itself and the dreamer would believe him to be a man of flesh and blood. The man was ordered by the divinity to instruct his creature in its rites, and send him to the

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### Labyrinths

other broken temple whose pyramids survived downstream, so that in this deserted edifice a voice might give glory to the god. In the dreamer's dream, the dreamed one awoke.

The magician carried out these orders. He devoted a period of time (which finally comprised two years) to revealing the arcana of the universe and of the fire cult to his dream child. Inwardly, it pained him to be separated from the boy. Under the pretext of pedagogical necessity, each day he prolonged the hours he dedicated to his dreams. He also redid the right shoulder, which was perhaps deficient. At times, he was troubled by the impression that all this had happened before.... In general, his days were happy; when he closed his eyes, he would think: *Now I shall be with my son.* Or, less often: *The child I have engendered awaits me and will not exist if I do not go to him.*

Gradually, he accustomed the boy to reality. Once he ordered him to place a banner on a distant peak. The following day, the banner flickered from the mountain top. He tried other analogous experiments, each more daring than the last. He understood with certain bitterness that his son was ready – and perhaps impatient – to be born. That night he kissed him for the first time and sent him to the other temple whose debris showed white downstream, through many leagues of inextricable jungle and swamp. But first (so that he would never know he was a phantom, so that he would be thought a man like others) he instilled into him a complete oblivion of his years of apprenticeship.

The man's victory and peace were dimmed by weariness. At dawn and at twilight, he would prostrate himself before the stone figure, imagining perhaps that his unreal child was practicing the same rites, in other circular ruins, downstream; at night, he would not dream, or would dream only as all men do. He perceived the sounds and forms of the universe with a certain colourlessness: his absent son was being nurtured with these diminutions of his soul. His life's purpose was complete; the man persisted in a kind of ecstasy. After a time, which some narrators of his story prefer to compute in years and

### The Circular Ruins

others in Iustra, he was awakened one midnight by two boatmen; he could not see their faces, but they told him of a magic man in a temple of the North who could walk upon fire and not be burned. The magician suddenly remembered the words of the god. He recalled that, of all the creatures of the world, fire was the only one that knew his son was a phantom. This recollection, at first soothing, finally tormented him. He feared his son might meditate on his abnormal privilege and discover in some way that his condition was that of a mere image. Not to be a man, to be the projection of another man's dream, what a feeling of humiliation, of vertigo! All fathers are interested in the children they have procreated (they have permitted to exist) in mere confusion or pleasure; it was natural that the magician should fear for the future of that son, created in thought, limb by limb and feature by feature, in a thousand and one secret nights.

The end of his meditations was sudden, though it was foretold in certain signs. First (after a long drought) a faraway cloud on a hill, light and rapid as a bird; then, towards the south, the sky which had the rose colour of the leopard's mouth; then the smoke which corroded the metallic nights; finally, the panicky flight of the animals. For what was happening had happened many centuries ago. The ruins of the fire god's sanctuary were destroyed by fire. In a birdless dawn the magician saw the concentric blaze close round the walls. For a moment, he thought of taking refuge in the river, but then he knew that death was coming to crown his old age and absolve him of his labours. He walked into the shreds of flame. But they did not bite into his flesh, they caressed him and engulfed him without heat or combustion. With relief, with humiliation, with terror, he understood that he too was a mere appearance, dreamt by another.

Translated by J.E.I.

**Appendix n. 6:**  
**Example of my own method of poetic extraction**

The poem 'Wave' is my own, and was extracted from the three prose writings that Beatrice produced during the second session of research on 13 February 2015. Following the methodological guidance of Leonora Cupane (2009), I first underlined and selected resonant fragments from the original texts that for me condensed meaning; these I rearranged, versified, and presented in a poetic composition (supra p. 131). A similar method I used to produce the other poems, always starting from the original participants' narratives, and never adding words of my own making. The translation into English came later after choosing to include those poems in my dissertation, and the same counts for the texts below.

1) Imaginative writing: Let me introduce myself...

My name is Wave. I was little, a dot, but bright. I am mobile dust. I am expanding space. I will be bowels and great silence. I have taken shape, which I would not know. Being liquid, thick, I change if my container changes and in turn I shape my container. Mine is a story of passion, interference, research and quite spaces. Not easy to tell but you must live it and listen to it. Let her live.

2) Epistemological writing: If the learning biography were a river...

It would become a blooming path between the roughness and sweetness, of time and body, would have courage and determination. Would welcome a lot and lose something for a where more unknown.

3) Autobiographical writing: The time that...

I was 10-12 years old. The age of my daughter today, approximately, a little less. I went out sometimes with my friends, just as she asks to do. But she is very beautiful, dresses like all her friends, has a very 'personal' bedroom, she makes up (secretly), take arrangements by chat ... She wants to go to meet someone ... Me too, though I dressed casually and I met some other sometimes, after countless phone calls... from Clara.

RING RING. HELLO? Silence, she hangs up.

RING RING. HELLO? Silence, she hangs up.

We decided, myself and my friends, to go to her. Clara. She lived in my street, but in a house much more beautiful, spacious, elegant, a top-floor penthouse ... dark, dark. Clara was strange, really strange. At school she had no understanding (and yet her mom was teacher, while mine had not studied and stayed home). The teacher had put me next to her desk because helped

her, and despite this I did not fall behind. So going back to that time, we went to ring Clara to see how she was. The Red Cross, the Maria Goretti of the situation. So her mom was never home and Clara was home alone, as usual maybe. She opens the door. She is naked, completely naked. We look at her and ask, but, Clara? But she burst out laughing, hysterical laughter, and threw herself on the ground, rolling and laughing. She is quite robust and I think: but how can she be there naked on the marble floor, as cold as my own? I remember a little hustle, my frightened friends, all a bit confused. But I knew what we should do: make her dress, convince her, find a way. Instead we left helpless and restless. This was Clara, one of us, and where was her mother?

**Appendix n. 6:  
Participative assessment information sheet**

The PhD thesis produced from the research conducted by myself the undersigned Gaia Del Negro at Canterbury Christ Church University (CCCU) in England was discussed on March 30, 2017 with a positive result. The examining committee asked to add to the text some reflections on the ethical dilemmas encountered during research, as well as writing.

For this reason, I would like to invite you to do a participative evaluation of the research and the text it produced. The participative evaluation process will require that you and I discuss about the research and text together (in presence or via Skype) and produce a short, shared note (1 page) that reflects our discussion. This means that our discussion will not be recorded. The dialogue will take approximately 1 hour and will explore the following points:

1. Your own and my own emotions in reading the text
2. Aspects of dis / satisfaction with the way the text presents the stories (method of analysis, theoretical framing, interpretation, representation)
3. Other interpretative frames that could be used to account more satisfactorily for the materials that were generated and collected (other interpretations)
4. Dilemmas of cooperative and auto / biographical methodology based on reflection on our experience

The text that we will discuss is the thesis section about your story, therefore Chapter Six if you were in the Bicocca group, or Chapter Eight if you were in the Canterbury group. No reading of the other chapters is required. If you wish, you can also read the Introduction and Chapter Five (Bicocca) or Seven (Canterbury).

After proofreading them I will send you the notes by email. You can make as many amendments as you wish before sending them back to me within 10 working days. Your anonymity will continue to be respected. Given the potentially sensitive nature of the material, you will be free to pull back at all times without giving any explanation.

Thank you for all your help and contribution.

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